

Imagining what it is like to be you

-Challenges of a hybrid community

Over the past few years I have been developing the idea of *a hybrid community of artistic expression* (Lehtonen 2016; Lehtonen & Pöyhönen, 2018). With hybridity, I mean bringing together people who otherwise would not be in contact with each other, and being open to their stories, situations and conceptions of art (see Bhabha, 1994). To this ephemeral community, I invite people from different social backgrounds to collectively create a joint piece of art, most often a performance with documentary traits. In the hybrid community of artistic expression, the very basic theatrical exercise is about how to take the other person's position. It can be described as an identity game of imagining what it is like for me to be you (Goldman 2012).

Forming a hybrid community of artistic expression can be seen as a method of making a documentary theatre performance with a special emphasis on the notion of *community*. It illuminates the situations of differently marginalized people and makes them more understandable and visible to others within the broader society. This way, putting oneself in the position of others could also be regarded as an act of civic awareness. It is an artistic and social experiment of living with the politics of difference, as sociologist Stuart Hall (1987) might put it.

Other home as a hybrid community of artistic expression

Other home (Toinen koti) was a project formulated around the idea of a hybrid community of artistic expression. The community involved participants from three roughly defined groups of people brought together in the context of a theatre production. These people were: 1) professional refugee artists, 2) professional artists with a background in Finland and 3) amateurs who had participated in a theatre workshop open for refugees, and who now wanted to join the performance as members of the chorus. The project's aim was to give voice to people in a vulnerable position, by giving them the opportunity to tell their stories in a way that could not really have worked with any other cast.

Some people, like Finnish professor of social politics Heikki Lehtonen (1990), argue that the whole notion of community belongs to the pre-modern era, and doesn't really exist in contemporary

society, where community is replaced by the structures of a society and based on agreements. In theatre we, however, tend to highly value the idea, or the ideal, of a community.

For me, the basic elements of a community that appeared in the *Other home* project can be illuminated with the help of four classical sociological concepts.

1) *Communitas*.

Other Home had elements of something that the anthropologist Victor Turner (1995) calls *communitas*. This is a special sense of equality between subjects of a ritual. *Communitas* is existential and anti-structural by its very nature and functions as a counterforce to the hierarchical side of the society. It represents the power of the oppressed, in this case the voices of the people with a refugee background. In *Other home*, the ultimate expression of structure was in texts from the Finnish Immigration Service, which also formed a part of the dramatic plot of the performance.

2) *Liminality*.

Referring to Arnold Van Gennep, Victor Turner (1995) also talks about *liminality*, which can be described as a basic characteristic for a person or a community in transition. The status of an asylum seeker or a refugee is liminal: non-belonging to the country of origin anymore and non-belonging to the present society yet (Butler & Spivak, 2007). Artists are, according to Turner, in a constant state of liminality as they work as agents for a change. In this way, many members of the *Other home* community had a double liminal identity: as refugees and as artists.

3) *Stigma*.

Another sociological concept that was crucial to the community of *Other home* is Erving Goffmann's *stigma* (1986). It is a trait in a person or a group of individuals that can be conceived as inferior or "spoiling the identity" in the eyes of the wider society. Belonging in a minority ethnic group or being a refugee is typically a stigma. In the *Other home* community, the aim was to show everybody on the stage as full identities and empower them by giving them a chance to talk for themselves.

4) *Imagined community*.

Richard Anderson's (2006) concept *imagined community* originally refers to the building of national states and construction of national identities. For me, it expresses something crucial also in the function of a hybrid community of artistic expression. Every member of the community imagined the community differently. Yet something, before all the will to share the stories of artists with a refugee background, was binding them together. It was a community that had a vision of its inner sameness while also being aware of the issues that caused its members to be radically different. I will come back to this later. The theatrical stage is a great place for imagining a community, making a representation of a community and questioning it together with the imagined community formed by the audience(s).

The phenomena of *communitas*, liminality, anti-stigma work and imagined community that emerged in the *Other home* project tell something about the quality of the community that it was. But there is of course much more to it. *Other home* was not a natural community and it ceased to exist after the last show was performed. Some of its members might not even want to be in touch with each other any longer, for multiple reasons. There were many tensions in the group. Differences in language, culture and gender roles might have created them, but there were also some more specific factors at play.

Politics here and back there

The stories and backgrounds of the refugee members of the hybrid community of artistic expression represented different sides of the conflicts in their countries of origin. It was not easy to build a joint performance when there were opposing opinions about the reasons of the conflicts "back there". The first time the situation degenerated into conflict was when we were preparing a small performance with the amateur group for people with a refugee background. One of the members of our community wanted to prepare a scene on a gas attack that had recently been reported to have occurred in Syria. Another member didn't approve because he felt that the news were false. All of a sudden, all the Syrians in the group took a stance either in favor or against the scene. It dawned on us that we had been working the whole spring in a group whose members represented different sides in the Syrian War: *the government forces* and *the rebels*. The group broke up because the most fervent proponents of the opposite viewpoints called it quits. But it was important that representatives of both positions stayed in the group. They found that they could make art together in spite of their differences.

The second time tensions emerged was when Iraqi Kurds declared independence in autumn 2017. Our work day began with heated commentaries and tears, for reasons I didn't understand at first. Little by little, it became clear that among us were, again, representatives of different sides of a potential civil war: *Iraqi Kurds* and *Iraqi Shia Muslims*. I had known all along that there were both Sunni and Shia members in our group, but the suspicion between them had not previously become apparent in any noticeable way. The Kurdish question created a chasm between the different political views. Later, these views were presented in *Other home's* Facebook group in Arabic, which made it even more challenging for us responsible for the project to follow the discussions and disagreements.

It is natural that the task of embodying people's experiences of forced migration in theatre rehearsals – or on the stage – can be politically inflammable. Suddenly you are opening your heart to a potential enemy. Trust can never be taken for granted. We were able to solve most of the conflict situations through discussions, and at times they were dealt with one-on-one with me serving as the mediator.

In addition to political views, there were also other differences that caused friction between the community members:

- Those who had received a refugee status in Finland and those who were still waiting for the decision or were about to be deported;
- Those who wanted to be vocal in criticizing the Finnish asylum policy, and those, who wanted to keep a low profile;
- Those who learned Finnish quickly, and were beginning to find their place in the Finnish society, and those whose resettlement process was fairly slow;
- Refugee men in central and refugee women in liminal positions;
- Older and younger generations;
- Professional artists and amateurs;
- Those who had leading roles in the performance, and those who were in assisting roles (the chorus).

It can be called a small wonder that the community of *Other home* didn't completely collapse because of all these differences. As I conceive it, the common interest of telling the stories of people with a refugee background was greater than the potential issues of conflict.

Other home as documentary theatre

Concerning the artistic work done within the community of *Other home*, it could be described as documentary theatre. It told the stories of the individuals involved in the process using their interviews, juridical documents as well as speeches by politicians as materials for the manuscript. Theatre artist and scholar Jules Odendahl-James (2017) writes how documentary theatre simultaneously questions and shapes the reality. It inverts the margin and the centre, and interrogates the structures of authority. This is done by giving space to lesser known and counter-narrative aspects of the reality. Odendahl-James highlights the body-to-body experience in defining what makes documentary theatre such a complicated and dangerous art form.

In *Other home*, the most concrete example of a documentary performance was in the physical existence of refugee artists on the stage: their bodies, breathing, voices and movement. Certain things in society are best told through a community. In the *Other home* project, a very crucial moment took place when the hybrid community of artistic expression encountered its spectators, who temporarily gave their unique input in its already existing hybridity. It was a community looking at a community asking itself what this new community actually was (Koski, 2015).

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Toinen koti - Other home

Toinen koti - Other home was a documentary theatre project carried out by the Finnish National Theatre in collaboration with the Helsinki City Council and the ArtsEqual research initiative (2016–2018).

The project dealt with stories of professional artists who had come to Finland as refugees and their encounter with the Finnish society, and the Finnish-born artists. As an outcome of the project, *Other home* performance was premiered on the National Theatre Omapohja stage in November 2017 where it played 29 times.

In relation to the project, an artistic action research was conducted by artist-researcher Jussi Lehtonen and professor of linguistic ethnography Sari Pöyhönen from the University of Jyväskylä.

The ARTSEQUAL research initiative examines the arts as public service and explores how the arts can meet the social challenges of the 2020s.

Jussi Lehtonen Actor, theatre director and artistic designer of The Finnish National Theatre's Touring Stage. The troupe takes theatre performances out on the road to places like health care institutions and prisons, and contributes community-oriented documentary theatre to the National Theatre's repertoire. Lehtonen defended his Theatre Arts PhD on actor's contact with audiences living in care facilities in 2015 at The Theatre Academy of The University of Arts, Helsinki