

These days it is rare to find a school hall magically transformed by a group of travelling players, bringing laughter, excitement, and food for thought. Surya's Story does just this.
Children's author Beverley Naidoo

It was the most tense play I have ever seen , ...you have to watch it: it's amazing.
Pupil aged 9 years

Surya's Story

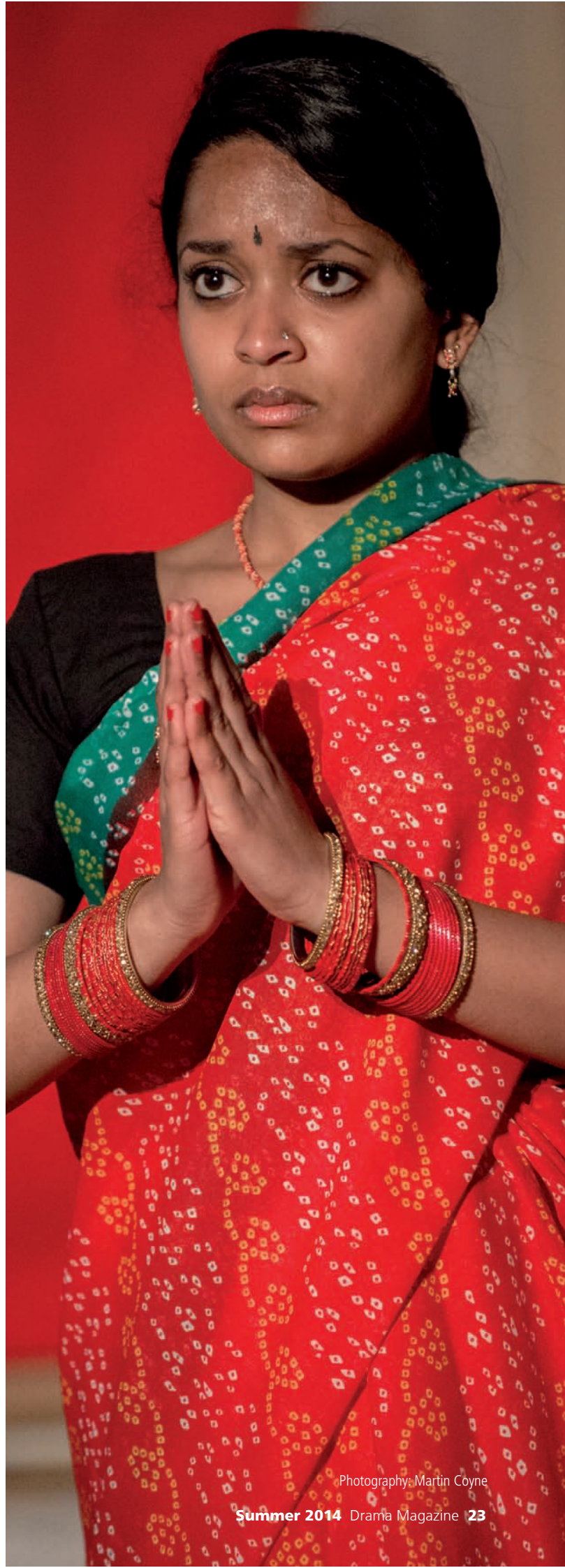
Sharon Muiruri

Introduction

Surya's Story was first performed in 1998 by Bournemouth Theatre in Education Team (BTiE) as part of a larger play, *Child of the World* (Muiruri 2007), which was inspired by a real Global March against Child Labour that was organized in 1998 and ended in Geneva. The play comprises four short playlets, each featuring a child who leaves their home to join the Global March for different reasons. *Child of the World* can be performed as one long play or split into individual stories as with *Surya's Story*.

Surya's Story has been performed as an individual theatre in education (TiE) programme on and off for ten years. For the last six years it has been performed with a full Asian cast.

It has been seen by literally thousands of young people and adults. In the summer of 2013, *Surya's Story* was experienced by over 3000 people: mostly young people. Surya Arts worked in partnership with YMCA, Angela Reece, Next Generation Project Manager and her team.



Photography: Martin Coyne

The TiE programme

Surya's Story is a Theatre in Education (TiE) programme, with a play performed by four Asian artists two actors, a dancer and drummer. The programme looks at the issue of Fairtrade and the Rights of the Child through the story of Surya, a little girl who sews footballs in a rural village in Rajasthan, India. We learn how some children are exploited by the West's need for cheap products and food. Most young people enjoy football, but do they ever think where those footballs come from? The theme of football is a wonderful way to engage an audience about environmental issues. It also encourages young people and adults to think about their responsibilities locally and globally. The audience makes connections with its consumerism and the plight of working children.

Key Aims

- To bring to people in local schools and community centres an experience of exciting, high quality live theatre as well as rich educational experiences
- To address Human Rights issues which fit the Every Child Matters Agenda and the Citizenship Curriculum
- To enrich the experience for young people and the wider community by introducing them to new cultural forms
- To provide a very positive role model of both Asians and men in a still largely mono-cultural area, where dance can still be regarded with suspicion by boys
- To explore various cultures and challenge stereotyped assumptions through a multi-arts medium
- To develop understanding of our environment and our responsibilities to it through the concept of stewardship with reference to Agenda 21 (1992 UN Earth Summit)
- To raise awareness of the Fairtrade campaign
- To build up self esteem and self awareness
- To enable young people to find out about the rights of the child in this country and globally, in particular Article 31 of the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child
- To give young people a voice to question and challenge and make choices about the commercial world around them
- To encourage schools to embrace The Creative Curriculum by developing a cross curriculum approach to the Rights of the Child.



The Format for Each Session (Half Day)

- 1 Introductions and warm-up football chants
- 2 *Surya's Story* by Sharon Muiruri: a performance (approx 30 minutes) which examines how and where many footballs are made, the relationship with child labour in the developing world, and the general issue of ethical trading
- 3 Break out Sessions
- 4 1 hour FUN workshops featuring music, Asian dance, Indian drumming, drama and football, creating pieces inspired by the pre-break discussions
- 5 Final gathering together to perform the pieces created in the workshops
- 6 The whole session is completed by the entire group creating their own global march



Surya's Story – The Play

Surya's Story is essentially a play within a play. The travelling players come to the village to entertain and tell their story. This is important as it gives a strong and positive cultural image of India.

At the festival of Holi the Middleman, Mr Chatterjee, lets the children who work for him watch a dancer as they sew their footballs. Surya became so engrossed in the dancer's performance that she stopped sewing, she stopped working. In that moment Surya discovered something very important that. ...there is more to life than work. Art has the power to transform... After Mr. Chatterjee punishes Surya for not working she runs away to join the Children's March.

After the play the audience has an opportunity to question Surya's Mother, Umba, and the Middleman, Mr Chatterjee, in a Hot Seating format. This is a very important element of the programme as the questioning leads to a greater understanding of the complexities of globalisation.

In the 2013 tour this aspect of the programme was very important; the young audiences become very angry with Mr. Chatterjee...

How can you hit a little girl? Do your own children work?

The Hot Seating leads to a greater knowledge. We discover that Mr. Chatterjee is not just a 'bad man' who hits children, outrageous as that is; but he is also under pressure from 'bosses' who want everything cheaply and those bosses in turn are under pressure from the West to get products at as low a price as possible. The actor in role as Mr. Chatterjee asks the young audience, 'How many of you have footballs?' Then, 'How much did you pay for them?' Gradually the young people make the connection between a remote village in Rajasthan and their own school playgrounds in Britain, with their own lives. The situation with Surya is not as simple as they thought. They are also surprised that adults can make mistakes and do wrong things under pressure.

Breakout sessions / workshops

These workshops allow the audience to take part practically in the drama, by exploring how Surya came to run away from home, they can experience a cultural input in Bhangra dance and Dhol drumming; whereas, in 'banner making' the participants have the opportunity to make statements about Fairtrade and the Right to Play.

Global March

The programme finishes when all the young people are invited to take part in their own Global March around and outside their schools to raise awareness of the Right to Play. It is a peaceful protest letting other children in their schools and their parents know about child labour.

I enjoyed it when we went around the school shouting 'Children have the right to play!' Participant aged 9 years (June 2013)

Multimedia aspect of the programme

We use film footage throughout the programme to help tell the story by a mixture of documentary material and created footage for the piece. The first film clip depicts images of Rajasthan. We see Surya and hear her voice. For some of our audiences in the South of England these images were alien and intriguing. The film gives context to the piece and tells us that Surya has sore hands from sewing footballs... we also learn that her father is dead.

The Team

The key to *Surya's Story's* success is partly to do with having such a strong and dedicated team who are not only strong performers and facilitators but passionately believe in Fairtrade. Two performers/facilitators, Pardip and Vin, based in Birmingham, have now worked on the project for several years and it was through their enthusiasm that the Birmingham pilot project was set up and delivered.

The Production Team:

Sharon Muiruri: Writer, Director and Producer

Pardip Kumar: Team leader of the tour, Actor and Storyteller:

As an artist I am grateful to be involved in Surya's Story as this is a powerful way to engage with an audience to think about issues which are relevant and affect us all.

Vinodh Mehay: Bhangra dancer from world renowned Bhangra Folk Group, Nachda Sansaar:

The production is so well put together and delivered, Surya's Story manages to reach out, touch and educate audiences of all ages. It was great being part of a wonderful team of professionals that gave me all the encouragement, support and confidence throughout and helped me deliver an eye opening theatre production. This has been my third year on this tour and I believe it has gone from strength to strength. I hope and look forward for the possibility and opportunity of being a part of Surya's Story again and leave audiences entertained and amazed.

Emerging artists:

Kishan Balli: Dhol Drummer

Kaily Nathan: Actress second year Applied Drama student from Winchester University:

Children really do learn from Theatre in Education (TiE), as this was evident throughout our tour. Many of the children had their eyes opened not only to Indian culture and but child labour. TiE allows children to learn without them realising they are doing so. Surya's Story is no different, all the children we worked with were encapsulated by it and felt very strongly towards the topic of Fairtrade and wanting to make a stand for children's rights all over the world.

Zac Dale: Lighting Projection and Sound.

I am currently studying Screenwriting at Bournemouth University but hail from Scunthorpe,

Lincolnshire. Being exposed to a wider cultural experience, and sharing this with children in a way that I never thought possible was uplifting, educational and one of the most worthwhile things I have done.

Heidi Steller: Set Designer

Martin Coyne: Photographer

Jordi Robert: Film

Simran (aged 10) played Surya in some of the performances. When Simran was not available Surya was on film footage.

This was the first ever role for Simran and she gained so many different experiences. Simran is more confident and proud to have been a part of the whole tour.

Partners

- CO OP
- WAVE
- Bournemouth YMCA FUSION
- Bournemouth Fairtrade
- Poole Fairtrade
- West Dorset Council
- Bournemouth Borough Council
- Poole Borough Council
- Bridging Communities

Where Surya's Story was performed

Tour June and July 2013

Surya's Story was performed in Bournemouth, Poole and West Dorset and a pilot mini tour in Birmingham. In Bournemouth and Poole *Surya's Story* was part of both towns' campaigns to become Fairtrade Towns. *Surya's Story* was performed mainly in schools, both junior and secondary. Although the programme is suitable for eight years upwards we had spontaneous requests while the actors were setting up for the reception and early years to have 'a little look'. This was due to the colourful set and costumes. So we let the small children in for the travelling players part of the programme. The travelling players begin the programme with a short cultural feast of drumming, puppets

and dancing. We let the younger children watch and participate in this section. This worked so well that we repeated the inclusion of the very young children in quite a few schools. *Surya's Story* was seen by two Pupil Referral Units in Sherborne and Dorchester. We also took it to a special school, Tregonwell, for young people with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (EBD).

Four community events occurred during the tour: in Poole High Street, Beaufort Community Centre Bournemouth, Dorchester Football Club and Birmingham South and City College, Handsworth Campus, Birmingham.

Two schools utilised the project for awareness raising events within their establishments.

Key benefits of the Programme

Raising awareness

It made me realise that we are and the children are very lucky. It could be us; absolutely brilliant, really really enjoyed it.

Teacher, Jacky Adams, Heathlands Primary School)

Absolutely fantastic, the end images brought a tear to my eye. It complemented the work we had done in school, the children were totally engaged.

Teacher, Chickerell School
St. James School Bournemouth

As a consequence of seeing the play several schools were looking to be involved in the Fairtrade movement and/or interested in becoming a Fairtrade school. The programme was a visual beacon and was used in several focal events such as:

Avonbourne School's Earth Summit where 400 children saw the play as a starting point for their day on raising awareness of Global Issues.

Surya Arts became part of both Bournemouth's and Poole's

campaigns to become Fairtrade Towns. Thousands of young people in schools, and the general public at Beaufort Road Community Centre, Bournemouth, and in Poole at Old Town School and the High Street were touched by the project. We had great support from Neil Short, Policy Development Manager, Environment & Regeneration Services, Bournemouth and Amy Gallacher, Community Strategy Support Officer (Poole).

Thanks for giving our Fairtrade campaign a super boost! Great Show!
Neil Short

Surya Arts were awarded a certificate by Fairtrade Bournemouth: Working towards Fairtrade Town Status. The Co-operative, who part funded the project, was able to give us school resources in the form of information booklets as some schools were interested in becoming Fairtrade schools.

Ever keen to promote Fairtrade, the Co-operative Group gladly supported performances of the play, Surya's Story, with £2,000 Community Fund award. So, in July, another Co-operative Area Committee member and I enjoyed truly memorable performances at a multi-ethnic Beaufort Community Centre event and another given for pupils of Kingsleigh Primary school. The audiences were totally captivated by



St. James School Bournemouth

drama, colourful costume, set and music, participating joyously playing with toys, instruments and dancing. Child labour was heart-touchingly portrayed and Fairtrade explained in discussion. The play is to be highly recommended for successfully demonstrating the need for the Rights of the Child and Fairtrade – a message conveyed with such gusto that it is bound to win over everyone and inspire them to take action!

Catherine Gonsalves of Wilts & Dorset Co-operative Group Area Committee

Aesthetically

It is vital that the performance levels are very strong for TiE to work. This was certainly the case with the Surya crew. All the team were excellent artists and facilitators. They managed to bring humour and pace into the delivery of the play. The inclusion of the dance piece is always a highlight of the programme. Ram, the role of the experienced Bhangra dancer, Vinodh Mehay, , experienced Bhangra dancer's role Ram is vibrant and appeals to all the audience including the boys.

Accomplished actor, Pardip Kumar, is Mr Chatterjee whose role is pivotal. He manages to get the audience to really like his character to begin with and then this is shifted around and audience are challenged when they hear he has hit Surya's hands. Having two young emerging artists proved to

be very engaging for school audiences who could identify with their roles. They loved Kishan Balli's funny interpretation of Sanjay and were really impressed by his Dhol Drumming. Kaily Nathan's portrayal of the Mother was powerful and touching. As well as the performers *Surya's Story* had professional artists' Heidi Steller and Jordi Robert working on the set and film footage respectively.

Working in PRUs and EBD schools

They built a beautiful Indian Palace
Tregonwell Student

In all three settings we worked in, Tregonwell Bournemouth EBD, The Sherborne Centre PRU, and Dorchester Learning Centre PRU, we found the young people to be both engaged and responsive to the programme. I think this was to do with the fact that they saw injustice in the play and they felt strongly about this. They particularly enjoyed the Hot Seating where, within a safe framework, they were able to challenge the authority figure, i.e. Mr Chatterjee. In all three venues we were able to transform their space into something completely different.

We have school phobics working alongside permanently excluded students, students at risk of exclusion and students with ASD, ADHD, PTSD, and a multitude of learning needs. Most of the time the students are working one to one or in very small groups with their teachers. When you performed they were all together in a large group (about 25) and in an unfamiliar environment (the scout hut).

Most of the students were genuinely moved by the story and felt empathy for Surya and her family. The role play after the show worked particularly well. You managed to get some of the students so involved and believing in the characters that they became quite animated in their defence of the poor overworked and underpaid children. The factory owner made them quite angry.

It was an excellent performance and the group were obviously experienced at working with young, hard to reach people.
Teacher, Dorchester Learning Centre

Community events

Surya's Story at The Beaufort Centre Bournemouth was a great success. We managed to attract a large audience of around eighty people and within that group there were twenty different cultures present (see Table 1).

This strand of the project was important as one of the YMCA's targets in working with Surya Arts was to encourage family audiences, young people and BME, Black & Minority Ethnic groups.

If you tell me I will hear, if you show me I will see-but if you make me feel, then I will understand.

Anon.

I really think this quality production brought close to home the issues that affect us all.

Charmaine Parkin (Bok Theatre)

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to connect, dance together and feel just how interconnected we are.
Anonymous

What is theatre? Theatre is the act of learning and of entertainment. This is what this play delivered in the spade loads. The play had me laughing, dancing and most importantly had me thinking. Thinking of what is right and wrong in western civilisation. We want things cheap, but to get this people are hurt. From putting this hurt and

Community Event Bournemouth 11 July 8.30pm in Bournemouth Home Countries of Attendees

1. Belgium	11. Yemen
2. India	12. Russia
3. Libya	13. Sudan
4. Cameroon	14. Jamaica
5. France	15. Scottish
6. Catalan	16. Sri Lanka
7. Malaysia	17. Britain
8. Liberia	18. South Africa
9. Aphasia	19. Italy
10. Bangladesh	20. Sweden

Table 1



damage in the forefront. Before you told yourself it's not that bad but now I know it's that bad. Thank you.

Muiruri Muiruri

Diversity

The celebration of diversity was a key aspect of our work. We have already mentioned the success of the community events and how the play became a positive cultural event. The pilot mini tour to Birmingham was a great success and proved that the programme works in two ways as a form of celebrating a more alien culture and for areas like Birmingham in celebrating a living culture. We travelled around Dorset, a predominantly white area; and then Birmingham, in the Midlands, an area with the second largest Asian population in the UK. The performers were all from the Indian subcontinent. This was significant as in the South of England the makeup of the actors was important, giving a positive identity to the Asian community. This comes at a time where there is, in some quarters, ignorance and, sadly, still pockets of racism towards this particular group. We found that in schools where there was only a small percentage of ethnic minority young people that they would stay behind and talk to the performers.

Enjoyable cultural experience, vibrant production. Very engaging, got across the message and really interesting.

Teacher, Heathlands Primary School, Dorset

By contrast, in the Asian region of Handsworth in Birmingham, the group's performances proved to be a celebration of their cultural heritage. The group always greeted the audience in a variety of languages:

Namaste, Sat Sri Akal, As-salam laykum

Hindu, Panjabi, Urdu and Arabic; and in Handsworth these greetings were answered with joy.

...audience who delighted in all the dancing and singing at the beginning.

It was exciting to see how immediate and engaging the play still is.

To the entire production team- An amazing and sophisticated interpretation of child labour depicted throughout the world. Moving, as the right to play is a very important aspect of a child's life. The presentation of such a sensitive issue of slavery also informs young minds of the scale of deprivation suffered by young children like themselves, all for the sake of profitable organisations. Who is to blame we may ask? We all should make a collective effort to alleviate the pressure of young children and pay more for the sake of the children, Fairtrade only the beginning. Thank you to your entire team for such a beautiful and original production.

Sharon Palgrave: St Marys C of E, Handsworth, Birmingham

Brazil

Sharon Muiruri was asked to attend and speak at *II Seminario Internacional de Teatro na Comunidad* (the Latin American conference for community theatre.) She decided to focus on *Surya's Story* for her talk, as an example of a current UK theatre in education programme that takes the Rights of The Child as its key theme (Muiruri: 2013).

Conclusion

The key to this TiE programme is raising an awareness that other children from around the world and, importantly and surprisingly, in the UK, are working instead of playing. From an issue point of view it is sadly still relevant especially as we took our play on the road shortly after the disaster in the factory in Bangladesh.

It is also to provide a positive cultural experience of the Indian subcontinent and, as with all good TiE, open discussions about the world in which we live. The programme offers an opportunity for young people to voice their own opinions.

I would say Surya had no life and that she was right to leave.

15 year old participant

The audiences are not left to feel sad and helpless but to think about what action they can take. As a consequence of the tour in July 2013 some action is already happening, for example:

- **One school is going to write letters to football coaches to buy Fairtrade footballs.**
- **One pupil referral unit (PRU) is going to become a Fairtrade Centre**

Beforehand, some of the audiences did not know the situation and they were not conscious of what was happening to other children and young people their own age. Now they have knowledge, they have choices, and they can make a difference.

Education should enable children to search for meaning so that they may bear witness to life. (Bond 1997:91)

References

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- Muiruri, S. (2013) Address delivered at *II Seminario Internacional de Teatro na Comunidad* (The Latin American conference about community Theatre).

If you are interested in any more information relating to *Surya's Story* please contact Sharon Muiruri at sjmuiruri@gmail.com.

With Thanks to Our Partners



Sharon Muiruri MPhil lives close to the sea in Bournemouth UK. She is Artistic Director of The Poole Passion (<http://www.poolepassion.com>), co director of State of Play (www.stateofplayarts.co.uk), Associate Lecturer at Winchester University in Applied Drama and Theatre in Education (www.winchester.ac.uk)