

# Eastern Europeans for Dummies



**Report from a Learning Lab on the immigrant audience development work of There There**

Learning  
Lab

**COUNTERPOINTS ARTS**

photo: Patricia Oliveira

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Produced by Counterpoints Arts, [Learning Labs](#) explore issues of migration, the creative arts and social change, together with the role and value of the arts and culture as a necessary democratic right. The Labs are designed to mobilise horizontal, democratic spaces for peer-to-peer learning and creation of new knowledge and facilitate cross-sector, cross-community activities and critical reflection.

On this occasion the Lab invited participants to respond to models of audience development focused on Eastern European and other immigrant audiences devised by performance company [There There](#). Engaging with a range of sectors including arts, advocacy, activism and academia, the Lab was loosely structured around the following questions:

- ‘Audience development’ – is it merely a tokenistic part of the grant application process, with diversity boxes diligently ticked by artists and/or venues?
- Or, is ‘audience development’ part and parcel of the necessary politics and conceptual thinking in the development of a creative production from the very get go?
- How might audience development shape a project like *Eastern Europeans for Dummies*, resulting in inclusion of Eastern European and emerging immigrant communities as participating audiences?
- How can we utilise ‘audience development’ as a critical tool in the building of cross-sector collaboration and public engagement in the current debates about immigration in the UK?

The Lab was part of the R&D process for There There’s piece [Eastern Europeans for Dummies](#), supported by Arts Council England, Rich Mix and the Romanian Cultural Centre in London (RCC). It took place on 28/1/2016 at the RCC, with the following participants:

Aine O’Brien – Co-Director, Counterpoints Arts (moderator)  
Dijana Rakovic – Project Manager, Counterpoints Arts  
Bobby Lloyd – visual artist; Co-lead Artist, drawing shed; art therapist  
Dr Umut Erel - Lecturer in Sociology, Open University  
Irene Ros – theatre director  
Anca Rusu – Communications Coordinator at the RCC  
Carmen Campeanu – Project Coordinator at the RCC  
Anne Stoltenberg – Project Development Worker, Migrant Voice  
Noemi Gunea - actor and theatre maker  
Anna Gat – playwright  
Dana Popa – documentary photographer  
Carmen Slijpen - Creative Director, Depot  
Nicola Middler – Producer and Project Manager, ArtReach  
Haneen Azzam – Intern, Counterpoints Arts  
Annaick Farrell- Intern, Counterpoints Arts

The Lab consisted of three distinct parts:

- An introduction to the creative and research practice of There There
- A discussion of Eastern European / immigrant stereotypes in the UK
- A discussion on audience development model put forward by There There

This paper summarises the main discussion points and ideas explored in the Lab and aims to suggest ways they can influence future audience development and the performance work of There There. It consists of three sections, which correspond to the three major topics discussed in the Lab.

## **2. The creative and research practice of There There**

There There is a 50% Romanian, 50% Serbian performance company, conjured up in London by Dana Olarescu and Bojana Jankovic. The company's work revolves around the ideas of immigrant and national identities and has been presented around the UK including at SPILL, Experimentica and Rich Mix.

*Eastern Europeans for Dummies* is a participatory studio piece that dissects the Eastern European stereotypes put forward by the media and politicians. Originally devised in 2011 as a short gallery piece, *Eastern Europeans for Dummies* evolved into a 35-minute studio show in 2014. At the time of the Lab, There There were further developing the show into an hour long participatory performance, to be performed at Rich Mix on 18/3/2016.

Research and audience development, focused on engagement with Eastern European / immigrant communities, is a core part of the company's practice. Over the last two years their audience development projects have focused on:

- creating partnerships with diaspora, advocacy and migration organisations in order to reach out directly to Eastern European / immigrant audiences and engage with a demographic that rarely participates in performing arts
- engaging with diverse audiences, immigrant and British ones alike - creating opportunities for integrated immigration discussions within performances
- integrating low-key participatory sections into performances, allowing audience members to meet and exchange immigration experiences
- commissioning independent audience research, allowing its findings to shape the company's creative practice

For *Eastern Europeans for Dummies*, the company are planning a national tour focused on areas with high proportions of Eastern European immigrants and proposed a model of audience development that would facilitate this:

- establishing relationship with local migration/diaspora/advocacy organisations, connecting with the audiences rather than venues first
- working with local migration/diaspora/advocacy organisations to devise audience development projects around the performance (working with local audiences over the period of several weeks before the performance)
- approaching the venue for the performance once the outline of the audience development/engagement has been established

The triangular relationship (diaspora/advocacy/migration organisations - venue - artists) as well as the company's intention to get to know and work with local audiences aimed to initiate longer-term relationships (between audiences and the venue, artists, organisations respectively) and avoid 'parachuting' into communities.

### 3. Eastern European stereotypes

Following the presentation by There There, the first part of the group discussion focused on Eastern European stereotypes, their origin and mechanisms. The discussion revolved around three topics - class, media and diversity - and how the stereotypes operate in these specific discourses.

#### 3.1 Class

It was pointed out that Eastern European immigrants are predominantly portrayed in the UK media as working / lower class, either performing menial jobs or as unemployed or homeless. The 'low-skill - no skill' image put forward also encompasses a certain set of looks, behaviours, as well as economic and social standings; one of the participants recalled being told several times in the past 'she does not look like a Romanian' - the 'compliment' resonated strongly with many participants who had similar experiences.

The class-specificity of Eastern European stereotypes was connected to the economic position of Eastern European countries - seen as poorer and less developed than the UK. However, the class conflict between Eastern European immigrants and even immigrants from the same country was also credited with contributing to the continuation of stereotypes. Middle class and/or well-educated immigrants often defend themselves from the stereotypes by refuting their own resemblance to them, rather than attempting to negate the validity of the stereotypes altogether. This has a dual effect: on the one hand it reinforces the notion that many Eastern European immigrants do reflect the dominant stereotype, while on the other contributing to vilification of working class / deprived immigrants:

*...the Romanians who are educated, who speak English, who can speak for themselves – they start saying 'we are all doctors and architects and I have no idea who those people begging on the streets are'. There's a social divide. You don't identify with this image so you protect yourself and start projecting this image of yourself as a good migrant. And people whose English is not very good or who maybe don't know how to make their voices heard, they become the silent victims of other Romanians in the UK but also precarious work in the UK – that's not completely addressed in the legislation.*

#### 3.2 Media

Participants from organisations working in advocacy and with a diverse array of immigrants noted that the overwhelming presence of anti-migrant headlines and news items has the knock on effect of turning groups of migrants against each other. It was also pointed out that many Eastern European immigrants are faced with two conflicting narratives:

- one told by the UK media, which portrays them as job-stealing, benefit-scrounging drains on the economy and,
- one told by the media in their home countries, which focuses on the brain-drain aspect of immigration, and portrays immigrants as a well educated, young crème-de-la-crème.

These equally reductive narratives contribute to further conflicts between different immigrant demographics and force Eastern European immigrants to identify with one stereotype or the other; no media space is left for any nuanced experiences.

This lack of public conversation on a spectrum of immigration experiences and the general stigma of being an immigrant were identified as a reason that many migrants refuse to 'admit' to their status:

*There is a tendency amongst migrants that if you can pass, you don't let anyone know you're a migrant. If you are white enough, if you speak English in a certain way, nobody questions you about it – you don't really want it rammed on you, so you never tell anyone, with some exceptions. And that's part of the problem with the migration conversation. You constantly hear the victim story and that's sexier in media terms because it's a bad story, but you never hear the success stories, unless it's about a really extremely successful person. You never hear the ordinary stories from ordinary people, and it's because that doesn't sell papers but also because so many people don't want to say they are migrants. It's really important that we keep fighting and claiming that term.*

### **3.3 Diversity**

It was asserted that the distancing from the stereotypes was a silent racial issue, inherently connected to Eastern European Roma. On the other hand, research on Eastern European migration frequently made a case that unlike the UK, which 'knows how to do diversity' the predominantly white Eastern European nationals often exhibit racist attitudes. This premise, which ignores the UK's own issues with racism, had been used to pin BME British nationals against the new influx of Eastern European immigrants.

The institutional approaches to diversity in the UK were also connected to a lack of interest in the emerging community of Eastern European immigrants. In the context of theatre and performance, Arts Council England was discussed as an example. Its recent report (*Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case – data report*) emphasises that art made for and by diverse demographics is one of its core aims; however the organisation defines 'diversity' through gender, ethnicity and disability - thus excluding many other minorities and groups from its efforts to engage and support a variety of audiences and artists. It was also suggested that the more challenging notion of 'inequality' should be focused on rather than 'diversity'.

This section of the Lab addressed the Eastern European stereotype and how it's perpetuated through discourses of class, media and diversity. It emphasised the importance of the company addressing the stereotype (in the performance and audience development) as a dynamic process that Eastern European immigrants partake in. Particularly, it was suggested that studying and reflecting the variety of opinions Eastern Europeans hold when it comes to the public stereotype could make an interesting topic of research within audience development projects. An analysis of how the stereotype influences relationships between Eastern Europeans was also put forward as a starting point for audience development initiatives. The notion of 'coming out' as an immigrant was signposted as an idea that could be explored with audiences. Finally, it was suggested that rather than focusing on 'diversity' and a lack of varied (self)-representations in the public realm, There There should consider addressing the inequality experienced by their audiences and Eastern European immigrants in general.

#### 4. Ideas and suggestions for audience development

In the last section of the Lab, the topics discussed above and the main issues pinpointed by the participants served as a framing tool, from which There There's audience development model was discussed. Participants offered concrete feedback and suggestions, which are summarised under the following thematic headings:

##### *Potential partners*

- Expanding the collaborating network to include universities (whose research interests and/or student body might be a good match).
- Collaborating with theatres already invested in audience development focused on other groups. Such venues would already have relevant networks that could be tapped into and would be familiar with challenges of audience development. Contact (Manchester) was given as an example of a theatre committed to this kind of work.
- Reaching out to cultural centres and institutes from Eastern European countries, emphasising the company's international make-up. It was however pointed out that state-funded cultural centres have very specific remit and responsibility, usually limited to promoting the national culture and language.

##### *The logistics of longer audience development projects*

- Designing audience development projects that require 3-5 one-day visits, instead of several weeks of intensive or full time work with the community, to reduce budget constraints. This would also give agency to communities and organisations involved with the project - which would be responsible for carrying the project on between the meetings.
- Training a local artist invested or interested in audience development, who could co-lead longer-term projects, to reduce the budget constraints. The company would not need to be present for several weeks at the time; the training would also facilitate other audience development projects in the area.
- Creating a digital platform for the project, providing a way for the company to work with communities long-distance. This would also allow organisations and audiences from different parts of the country to connect, ensuring local experiences are not isolated, and serve as a living archive for the project.

##### *Performance and artistic suggestions*

- Conducting research on Eastern European immigrants self-identification and perception of stereotypes; the results could feed into the performance and provide a new resource on the topic.
- Including contributions from local artists into the show: this would allow the performance to reflect the specific circumstances of individual cities, towns and regions as well as connect local artists to new organisations/venues/audiences.
- Incorporating post-performance meet-and-greet opportunities, which would allow the audience to talk to the company in a low-key setting and create further opportunities for audience members to meet and share their experiences (an official post-show pint was suggested)

### *Engaging with audiences who don't participate in performing arts*

- Performing outside of traditional theatre venues so as to be more inviting to audiences who do not consider themselves theatregoers (which is true of many minority audiences).
- In relation to attracting audiences who don't have entirely positive attitudes to immigration: ensuring they are not 'set-up', but rather invited to a dialogue and given space, before, after or during the performance. At the same time ensure both the performance and any audience development project are a safe environment for Eastern European audiences - making that a priority.

## **5. Conclusion**

The Learning Lab aimed to explore models of audience development focused on Eastern European and other immigrant audiences devised by performance company There There. The company was particularly focused on investigating the potential of their audience development model: establishing relationships with migration, advocacy and diaspora organisations as a way to engage with Eastern European audiences and conducting research and audience development projects with them in advance of performance dates. The company presented this model as triangular: migration/diaspora/advocacy organisations - artists - venues. The Lab successfully attracted participants from all relevant sectors.

Following the presentation of the company's work the Lab focused on discussing mechanisms behind the Eastern European stereotypes, particularly as they relate to class, media and diversity. These topics were connected to *Eastern Europeans for Dummies* and the company's audience development work to suggest possible research and performance points of investigation. Inter-immigrant relationships, self-identification with the stereotype, self-representation as a migrant, and a refocusing on inequality (as opposed to diversity) were suggested as potential topics for both the performance and the company's audience development projects.

In the last part of the Lab, the participants pointed out practical challenges that the company's audience development model might face. Logistical and financial challenges of conducting several longer-term projects were particularly emphasised. Participants suggested ways of reducing the cost and the time the company would need to spend in each location that would also benefit the project by giving agency to participants, connecting them to other audiences in the country, facilitating archiving and incorporating training.

It was also suggested that networks necessary for this kind of audience development work might already be in place, with universities, specific theatres and cultural centres pointed out as potential partners. The participants also felt that any research conducted with the audiences would need to be reflected in the performance, for example by including local artists or paying extra attention to how audience participation influences the show.

Participants stressed that the company's ambition to create dialogues between immigrants and British audiences, even those who might not have entirely positive views on immigration, requires attentiveness when it comes to ensuring all groups feel safe. The participants particularly pointed out that taking the performance outside traditional theatre spaces might make it more appealing to the demographics There There are addressing, given their traditionally low participation in performing arts.

Finally, in the context of an R&D for a performance as well as There There's audience development work, the two focal points of the Lab are particularly important. On the one hand, the participants quickly engaged in a nuanced, passionate debate about Eastern European stereotypes, proving them to be a topic of some relevance as well as a significant point of deliberation within the arts, advocacy and research. On the other, the audience development models put forward by There There were primarily addressed from a practical, financial, logistical and marketing standpoint. The need for a much stronger local anchor within these projects (to include other artists, more venues, a digital aspect etc.) is a common denominator for the different suggestions offered by participants and would therefore likely represent a good starting point for future audience development work.