

Three Weeks

THE OTHER SIDE

Katharine Hurst and Kelly Taylor-Smith talk about 'The Other Side', a play based on a radio documentary, 'Calls Across The Wall', which tells the story of 'Hello Peace', a phone line that has connected Israelis and Palestinians living on separate sides of conflict.

What inspired you to turn a Radio 4 documentary into a stage play?

We had been researching subject matter regarding social barriers and division and thought 'Calls Across the Wall' was a fantastic source of inspiration. The stories told are incredibly touching and courageous with a very strong message that communication is a gateway for reconciliation. The stories told in the documentary are overwhelming and fascinating. We were unaware that a phone line even existed, as a means of facilitating dialogue between the two sides. We found two aspects particularly inspiring. The first being the fact that the phone line came about through a simple wrong number, and the second being the story of Robi Damelin, who wrote a letter to the mother of the sniper who killed her son, as a way of moving towards reconciliation.

It was a breath of fresh air to hear that beneath the gunfire, bombings and hatred portrayed in the media, there were real people reaching out to one another and finding common ground as human beings. When we listened to the stories; knowing that the words were not

coming from a dramatic script, but from real people, it immediately added depth and sincerity which we hoped would affect the audience on a more emotional level.

How much of the play is fact and how much fiction?

The piece has been inspired by real people and real events. The show begins with three characters describing their experience of the conflict. Their words are taken from real interviews from members of the Parent's Circle in Israel and Palestine. In order to create a narrative and present human beings living ordinary lives, we had to develop additional characters and scenes, such as banter in a military truck, a family birthday party, people cooking dinner; but all the

principal characters in the play are based on real people and their true stories. In order to suit a small cast of three, some characters are a combination of a number of people interviewed.

Does the play have a specific political message? Are you trying to change people's opinions?

From day one we decided that we weren't making a specific political piece of theatre. We wanted to show the human beings behind the conflict, not just the conflict in the Middle East, but any kind of social division. The piece has a universal message. We all share the same pain, we cry, we laugh, we bicker with our families and regardless of race, religion, colour or creed, we all have a shared humanity. It wasn't so much

a case of changing opinions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or weighting the argument on a particular side, it was more a case of showing that people can find a gateway to peace, through simple communication.

Is theatre a good medium to present political issues and/or influence political opinion?

The intimacy of theatre

can be an incredibly powerful tool for affecting people. As a theatre company, we also tour Brechtian (socialist, political) theatre to schools and have found that presenting political theatre in a way that is suggested as opposed to forced, allows the audience to make up their own minds.

What has the response been to the show at the Fringe so far?

The reviews and emails we have received have been fantastic, such as the one below.

"I was stunned by what was put forward. Believable beyond belief and very emotional. A tender piece of theatre that really touches the heart."

Audiences have appreciated the neutral approach to such difficult subject matter and have been overwhelmed by the fact that the stories of peace and reconciliation are true. People have found it incredibly emotional and many tears have been shed. The scenes of loss and suffering in the show are very moving, but the final image of people from both sides of the divide sharing their stories and talking together leaves the audience with an uplifting and positive outlook for the future.

The Other Side, Gilded Balloon Teviot, 5 - 31 Aug (not 18, 25), 2.45pm (3.45pm), prices vary, fpp 218.

Pictured: Katharine and Kelly with fellow cast member Simon Nader. Photo: Kat Gollock

