



# Pure joy, mischief and a sea of smiles

**Anne O’Gorman, Senior Project Officer for Youth Arts at the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), interviews Adam McGuigan, Artistic Director of Barefeet Theatre, Zambia, about his journey to create a life-changing theatre company for children and young people. Since its foundation in 2006, Barefeet Theatre has used play, creativity, and empowerment to give vulnerable children a chance at a better life. Founded by former street children in response to the plight of young people living on Aô’s streets, the company harnesses the power of performance, educational workshops and more to help vulnerable young people become healthy and socially competent. Barefeet is about change, achieving transformation through mischief. It is hard work, but always involves smiles and laughter. Their theatre workshops work with two thousand children in forty communities in Zambia and on the national stage at the annual Barefeet Youth Arts Festival.**

**AO’G** Adam, with a surname like McGuigan I suspect you weren’t always based in Zambia! How did you find yourself in Zambia and how did Barefeet start?

**AMcG** I’m from a little town called Ballymoney in County Antrim, which is as far from Zambia as possible. I have been in Zambia for almost nine years now. Initially, I was working as a freelance theatre director in the UK. In 2005, combining a desire to both travel and experiment with performance style and cultural interpretation, I put together a one-man touring show and set out to tour the world. My grand ideas came to a halt after about six months when I lost my money and some belongings in Zimbabwe and had to go to the nearest Irish Embassy which was in Zambia and I have been in Zambia ever since.

By chance I met with a group of local artists who used to live on the streets. I was fascinated by their performance style and, if I’m honest, I was envious of their effortless charm and lack of restrictive self-awareness. Most of all, I was captivated by the pure joy conjured in the energy of their performance. I was hungry to collaborate. We started to work with children living on the streets offering creative workshops to encourage them to put their energies into something constructive. Once in a safer environment the children were much more open to talk about their challenges and seek assistance with their basics needs.

We were young, idealistic artists with grand designs to change the world and even from the beginning we could see the potential. The response from the children was incredible and we felt there was something here that needed to be nurtured. I was struck by the fact that, on the streets, the children weren’t pleading for money or games or computers; instead they used to ask me for shoes. Having shoes meant dignity. Yet whilst we danced and sang, performed and rehearsed we did so on our bare feet. We loved the mixture of strength and vulnerability in the name, and after much discussion we became ‘Barefeet’.

**AO’G** What you do is literally life-changing for some of the children and young people involved, and yet it is uncompromising in its artistic standards. Regardless of the narrative which underpins the work, the performers are simply excellent by any measure. Why do you think Barefeet is able to hold those two important pieces – the development piece and the art piece – equally, and how do you go about doing it?

**AMcG** Thanks for saying that. I think that one thing the company aspires to have in our performances is integrity. I believe audiences respond to authenticity and integrity. We would be the first to admit that we are a mishmash motley crew of artists with various skills, but I love the truth the guys show in their performance and I believe this is what audiences relate to.

The team also works hard. We have tasted success and failure at home and abroad and we know what we want to achieve. There is a strong work ethic in the group which applies to all members. I think that practically we approach our work with determination and professionalism, and therefore demand a lot from members. Perhaps in the process the art comes first, rather than dwelling on where the artist has come from. But treating the artist professionally and having high expectations, means the company and the members are working towards a shared goal, and then the positive effects and development agenda follow naturally.

**AO’G** Barefeet’s methodology is Participatory Process Performance. What does this mean in practice?

**AMcG** We have built our methodology from scratch over the years. Largely inspired by Alex Mavrocordatos’ exploration of participatory methodology, Barefeet have developed Participatory Process Performance (PPP). As the name suggests, the emphasis is on three areas. The initial stage focuses on the Participation of the group or individual. Through engaging the group on issues or topics that are explored communally and through the tools of external character and situation, participants are provided with a space to process discoveries, outcomes or personal developments in a non-intrusive environment. By learning from peer participation and sharing, we believe that this Process period allows for a more lasting and effective engagement.

PPP draws together a range of Theatre for Development and Participatory Research methods. It is process and product. Community artists/participants tell their own story, highlight their own concerns and develop their own strategies amongst themselves, with their neighbours or with those who have influence over their lives (policy makers). We have honed our techniques and learned from our mistakes. Barefeet uses storytelling as an integral device throughout all of our interventions.



Above and opposite page: Barefeet Zambian Parade, Photo: Marc O'Sullivan.

With emphasis on the third phase, Performance, PPP casts – and trains – participants in the role of facilitators/teachers. In this way, participation of the community/group as partners is prioritised and integrated at all levels in a process that works towards cultural action or enhanced psychosocial support of the group and a performance by the community/group as artists. At the same time, PPP still allows for the outside facilitator/artists to weave their research into their own performance that can in turn be used to generate a recurrent and parallel cycle of PPP activities. We are blessed at Barefeet to have a continual stream of projects and practitioners who help us grow and evolve our methodology in our context.

**AO'G** In your experience, what is it about spectacle, street theatre and acrobatics that work so well for the young people you work with? What makes it unique and work better than, say, soccer?

**AMcG** I think young people can see improvements very quickly in these areas and I think that all are fun! Digging a bit deeper about why our activities are effective with young people I would suggest that whilst children's centres and institutions of care do an admirable job in providing the basic physical needs of a child – shelter, food, clothing, health – considerably less consideration is given to their psychological needs. Once integrated into a children's centre, few mechanisms are in place to deal with the transition from the street. Children are energetic and curious human beings, and if their energy is not properly channeled and nursed they can easily be misunderstood. I think that well-structured, creative stimulation is very important for healthy intellectual development. Additionally, by engaging a child's spirit you are contributing to their holistic development. Activities such as drama offer an escape from whatever trauma was inherent in street life, while also offering a safe domain in which to process it. This is what is unique about the Barefeet initiatives and contrasts to some existing government initiatives, like bringing children into the army, which can have limited success. I don't think that art alone can address all the challenges our young people face, but we aspire to work to promote a more joined-up services approach when working with the children.

Finally, for me the power with drama is that it's all about people. It's about characters and it's about life. By reflection and participation in characters' journeys there is personal investment in the problem and resolution and, in my opinion, a more lasting engagement.

**AO'G** You've said before about the young people that you work with that Barefeet 'allows them to be children'. Can you talk about that a little?

**AMcG** I feel that the kids we work with on the streets are forced into adulthood at an early age. Being in survival mode when fighting for your next meal. Where you stay, how you manage your money, your health, your safety. Navigating sexual advances, navigating the authorities whilst also dealing with the usual adolescent challenges. I find that when our children participate in Barefeet activities it's an opportunity for them to play. Again, I relate back to authenticity and truth. I believe that all humans enjoy an aspect of play in their lives, especially children. If we can facilitate children being given the opportunity to be children (even for a short period) and combine this with options for making positive life choices guided by trusted facilitators who have a shared history with the children, then I believe we can have a big impact. It's fun to play and therapeutic to laugh, it reminds us that we are human and we are connected. When children feel abandoned and isolated, the feeling of connecting with people is critical.

**AO'G** Can you tell us about the cycle that you've said is key to all your work: Performance, reflection, growth/sustainability and evaluation?

**AMcG** Well, let me talk about the work with children still living on the streets. The primary element is to get them familiar with Barefeet's activities, its people and its vibe. This can take place at our festival, the annual Christmas show or at any of the interventions throughout the year. Once the children are familiar with us, the outreach officers will then engage the children on the streets, listen to them and inform them about our activities in our partner centres. If a child agrees to come to our programmes in the drop-in centre, they are welcome. Once enrolled in one of the drama workshop activities, the children are able to access other services at the drop-in centre. We use external characters as a tool to talk about challenges that the children can relate to, this is part of the process element of the programme. All of our programmes build towards a public performance, so as we get closer to the performance day, it may become hard for a child to sleep on the streets and still stay on top of rehearsals. Thus, frequently the children are so focused on the rehearsals that they also want to stay off the streets to make sure they are well-rested. Once the performance takes place, and the children experience the nerves, adrenalin and praise, we find that they are then completely connected

and eager to be involved in the next performance. That is our job; to allow a process of reflection and then a space for the children to move into one of our more stable partner centres where the process can start again.

**AO'G** There seems to be a huge amount of administrative work always happening in the background for you and your team. Even the descriptions of applying for visas and the cost implications sounds exhausting and frustrating. How do you balance making the artistic work against all of the administrative and funding effort necessary to keep the show on the road. I think this would resonate with many small voluntary youth theatre leaders who are surprised by how much administration is necessary to make the space for the creative work they want to do.

**AMcG** When there is an artistic project happening that is always my primary instinct. There is a huge amount of pressure to maintain the two. Without the artistic content I am an office worker, and without my office hours there is no money for artistic work. This is before we start to talk about health and safety, child protection and monitoring. I think if you are passionate about the art then you will find energy for the admin. In the nine years I have worked with Barefeet, I have never once felt on top of my admin. I suppose the barometer I have used is that when I am dead and gone will anyone remember the beautiful report I wrote, or the piece of art that resonated? I suppose with all small voluntary youth theatre leaders, we do the best we can with the resources available to us and the time we have.

**AO'G** Lastly, what is the value of international exchange? What do you think your young people gained from their trip to Ireland, what do you think audiences gained from meeting them, and what might the value of connecting with Irish youth theatre members be?

**AMcG** There is huge value in connecting young people from different places. The trip was intense and full of responsibility for our young people. They really had to cope with diverse audiences, expectations and experiences. Within six weeks I saw their capabilities and confidence rocket. I saw their world view expand, their curiosity stretch and their ambition jump. Since they have returned they have approached working with our children in a more dynamic and energised fashion. The trip has provided a real sense of hope to those still living in vulnerable situations. There is a sense that if these guys can travel then why can't we? Making the impossible possible, hope.

For audiences, our feedback has shown that the young people we interacted with gained a direct opportunity to learn about the history and background of a country very far away. The children were motivated and engaged through the workshops. As well as acquiring new skills, the children became more aware about development issues in a different country. I also feel the audiences got a slice of life from far away, they were informed and energised by a group of people with a beautiful story to tell. I would hope the Barefeet guys provided an injection of inspiration and, at the very least, spread a sea of smiles across people in Ireland.

Barefeet have long been part of the NYCI youth worker exchange and have benefitted immensely from the collaboration and sharing which is facilitated through well-organised interactions. Connecting with Irish youth theatre members was something that we were very keen to do. Different geographies have different opportunities and challenges. One thing the team couldn't get their heads around was that the young people in Ireland were reticent to get on the floor and dance. Theatre is about people, and you produce work based on the experiences and relationships you have in the world that you are aware of. I can't help but be inspired seeing seeds being spread helping to connect the world and spread the important influence art can have in human transformation. Any opportunity to interact with other youth theatre practitioners can only enhance this process.

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Above image: Barefeet Zambia Parade, Photo: Marc O'Sullivan.

## NYCI Development Education and Working with Barefeet Theatre Group

Development education (DE) in youth work aims to support young people to increase their awareness and understanding of the interdependent and unequal world in which we live through a process of interactive learning, debate, action and reflection. DE challenges perceptions of the world and encourages young people to act for a more just and equal society at a local, national and international level. For NYCI, quality development education is key and quality development education shares many of the same principles as good youth work. These include starting with and valuing young people's views; learning through participation; and promoting equality, responsibility and mutual respect.

NYCI promotes a model of DE that encourages young people to explore the local and global contexts of justice issues. We do this through exploring development and human rights issues from a series of viewpoints using methodologies that best suit the situation and group, making connections between how we live in Ireland and how this impacts on the lives of people in the developing world. Through our DE work, the youth sector/participants are supported to:

- critically examine their own values and attitudes
- appreciate the similarities and differences between people, locally, nationally and globally
- accept and value diversity
- understand the global context of their local lives and present different viewpoints
- develop the skills that will enable them to combat injustice, prejudice and discrimination

Working with Barefeet Theatre Group, we felt that we could raise the profile of development education in Ireland. The use of drama is a perfect fit in terms of it being an interactive methodology which places emphasis on participative, learner-centred education that has the ability to build critical thinking, generates capacity and motivates people to take action. Drama facilitates the exploration of the economic, environmental, cultural, political and technological aspects of an issue or activity from a personal, local, national, and global perspective. It can help us consider the food we eat, clothes we wear, air we breathe, gadgets we use, political systems in which we live, and other key issues we should all be aware of.

Drama is used to explore justice and development issues to support the enhanced critical thinking skills of those with whom we work. Drama suits the informal environment in which youth work and development education takes place. These approaches are flexible, participative and learner-centred.

**Valerie Duffy**  
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