

Phoenix Rising: True Heart Theatre at the Museum of London

True Heart Theatre (www.trueheart.org.uk) was engaged by the Museum of London's Community Access Officer, Lynda Agard, to facilitate a process with London's Chinese community which has led to the creation of a permanent art installation in the Museum's newly refurbished Galleries of Modern London. The commission to create this work of art was entitled 'Beyond the Public Face', and part of a three year £20m refurbishment plan for the Galleries which re-opened to the public in May 2010.

The Museum wishes to honour communities which contribute to the character of contemporary London. The Chinese New Year Festival, Nottingham



Members of True Heart Theatre (2009-2010): from top left clockwise - Linda Chan, Quang Chau, Elaine Foo (now returned to Singapore), Alice Lee, Cecil Su (now returned to Taipei), Veronica Needa (Co-artistic director), Julian Li, Wing Hong Li (Co-artistic director), Valentina Wong, Agnes Law (just returned from Singapore), Lap Kung Chan, Julie Cheung In-hin.

The Museum of London's mission is to inspire a passion for London



London is one of the most vibrant and cosmopolitan cities in the world with a story stretching back over a quarter of a million years. Newly refurbished, costing £20m and launched in May 2010, the **GALLERIES OF MODERN LONDON** are five galleries and 7,000 objects which transport you through the capital's tumultuous history from 1666 to today.

Carnival & Gay Pride Parade are significant events which Londoners celebrate with many visitors from overseas. Fortunately for True Heart, the museum decided to focus on the Chinese community in the first of these commissions! Lynda Agard, in her outreach to London's Chinese community, had



Lynda Agard - Museum of London's Community Access Officer

heard of us, and attended one of our Free Open Monthly Sunday events. She liked what she saw. And she knew she needed professional support to facilitate representatives of London's heterogeneous Chinese communities together to inspire the design, select the artist, and then work with the artist in the making of this art installation. Three Forum meetings took place on Sundays 1-6pm in March, April and July 2009.

Comments from the participants...

'Everyone seemed to open his/her heart and shared life experiences with us. I found it very touching.' Crystal

'Each testimony/story told was very special & personal. For this I am grateful.' Willem

This process included action methods and Playback Theatre as the focus of each day, with translation in three languages (English, Mandarin, Cantonese). Over 100 participants representing different Chinese communities in London, aged 9 – 85, attended

these three events. They were a mix of British-born Chinese, long term and recent Chinese immigrants, from mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Mauritius, also some of mixed-race background, as well as non-Chinese friends.



Workshops at first forum

The first forum investigated the theme of Chinese New Year, and what does being of Chinese origin mean to the participants. Several professional artists were invited to shadow our process, listening and watching. Through Playback Theatre, stories of life in the UK emerged: tensions between original and new home, dreams and aspirations, hopes and wishes. After this first forum, the artists then submitted their proposals formally to the museum, and one was selected by a committee which included representatives from the Chinese community.



Hale Man – Artist

experience in community engagement – won the commission, and at the second forum was introduced to the community. The artwork would be a Wishing Well, with Phoenix rising, and concept of the five Chinese elements - Metal, Water, Wood, Fire and Earth - incorporated. The process also required the community to participate in the physical construction of this art installation during the following months.



The making of the phoenix

Playback Theatre stories included Mr Leung’s who came to London, highly educated but without English language skills. He did manual labour and struggled to survive, and knew he could have made choices that would have led him to a life of crime. He is now a head teacher of the largest Chinese Supplementary School in the UK with over 1000 students coming in to Soho to study Chinese on Saturdays and Sundays. In his early life in Hong Kong, he said he had always admired how Westerners seemed to have such a broad range of knowledge and interests. Over the years in London, despite suffering some level of racial abuse, he chose to explore the positive



True Heart in action

experiences that were available to him. At last he understood how easy access to museums and art galleries here was such an important and rewarding influence on each person’s expansion of general knowledge and human understanding. He is, needless to say, very popular with his students and of the arts as educational tools.



Lynda telling

The third forum was initially planned to be a celebration of completion. But the construction workshops had gone slowly, the timing coincided with exams, and there was not regular enough attendance at the workshops to make good progress. So the third forum was focussed on galvanising the community to finish the installation.



Pulling together as a team

It was also a time for Lynda and Hale to tell their stories of the process, so that the community had some insights into the complicated negotiations with museum hierarchy about a range of issues. We ended that day with new energy and commitment to finishing the work together. By October 2009 our contribution was done. And the rest had to be completed by Hale and the museum.

When the installation was revealed to us in May 2010 at the opening of the new Galleries, we had to adjust our expectations. Compromises and changes had to be made because of Health and Safety requirements. The mesh meant to resemble fire

is now squashed onto the frame to look like an egg, with some flicker of flames at the top! The phoenix tails are now compressed onto the main structure, so that the public can't touch them. The bowl representing the wishing well below and the mirror above are both much smaller than originally envisioned. Only we and Hale would be aware of all these differences! Even so, all our efforts feel hugely rewarded. It is magnificent.



Hale telling



In the museum at last! Hale with her family and some of the team

The installation emerges from the Chinese community, but it is also something for all migrants to identify with and celebrate. We come with wishes and hopes, fire and passion, many fleeing terror and tyranny, or following opportunity and connection.

We come to make a new life,

and, like the phoenix rising, we all add something special to the myth and magic of this great old city.

Museum of London
London Wall, London EC2Y 5HN

- Access to Museum along upper high walk
- Lift access to high walk



PS. We heard that the Museum had originally thought to commission a dragon to represent the Chinese in London. It was thanks to Lynda's determination to ask the community if this would be acceptable to them that this project arose. Representatives of London's Chinese said that the dragon was indeed an important symbol, but that nevertheless they would like to be consulted more fully. With this mandate Lynda secured funding for this entire process. It is therefore particularly satisfying that the outcome is a Phoenix! True Heart Theatre looks forward to more projects with the Museum of London. Lynda is keen to maintain and develop these new relationships. Hale had a baby during this time!

(Report from Veronica Needa - www.trueheart.org.uk - September 2010)