

# "TWO NEWCASTLES"

## Newcastle upon Tyne, UK and Newcastle, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa

Two Newcastles is a co production between Curious Monkey and Newcastle Arts Development Organisation from Kwa Zulu Natal. It's a flagship cultural project for **Newcastles of the World**, an alliance of all of the places in the world that share the name Newcastle. The project is supported by International Newcastle.

The artists met at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown South Africa 2015 where Curious Monkey were running the Remix Laboratory in partnership with the Swallows Foundation UK. After a brilliant 10 days working together, the artists knew they wanted to take their collaborating further. In 2016 artists from NADO visited North East England to work with the UK cast on research and development for the new show. The UK artists visited South Africa in early 2018 to continue the exchange, after running workshops in schools and in hospitals to gather stories and share songs about what it means to live or be from the northeast of England. The show will then tour in the northeast and in South Africa in summer 2018.

For more information see <http://curiousmonkeytheatre.com/blog/portfolio/two-newcastles/>

**Here are the impressions of the Newcastle upon Tyne artists of their time in South Africa in late January/early February 2018 drawn from their blogs during the trip . First Alice Blundell, one of the cast of Two Newcastles takes us through what she's been up to in South Africa with Curious Monkey.**

"We're coming to the end of our first week in Newcastle KZN and it's been full on to say the least. The epicness of the journey and the project really hit me today. When the NADO team came to visit us in Newcastle UK, Amy instructed us to take them on our tour of our city, and see it through new eyes. Today it was Velaphi's turn to take me around his Newcastle. I've seen a lot this week; thunder storms that echoed scenes from Jurassic park, rain that pelted the roof you were convinced it was going to burst through, the city of Jo'burg with its beige towers and change of scene and atmosphere on every corner, vast stretching landscapes, cows heads in shopping trolleys, an amazing artist community, murals and development projects on buildings, and today, the township of Madadeni near Newcastle.

Stan mentioned really "seeing" South Africa today. And I have to agree. I wasn't prepared for it in any way shape or form. The townships are vast, the houses are modest, some are made from brick and others are tin shacks. Some are built up and bigger with fancy gates. A lot of people live in them. The contrast is unfathomable. Some people are living with no running water or electricity. When a storm hits and your house floods you have to take all of your wares out of the house and dry them in the sun the following day. There are Americanised malls dotted about and yet old ladies sitting on the side of the road making bricks by hand, or thatching brooms. There are cows and goats everywhere. The animals are integral, they signify wealth, they are food, they are slaughtered at weddings and burials (the deceased wrapped in the cow skin). They are the core of township living. The way of life here is simple, and it's all about your family, and not just your blood family but your neighbours and your community. It was beautiful and overwhelming and I was glad of the company of Velaphi and Schuppo as at times it could be unnerving. Everybody greets you all of the time. "Not like you white people" Velaphi said, "you guys just smile and nod". I smiled and nodded.

Sometimes you feel like you know where you are and then like a smack in the face you know you are so very far from home. I don't quite know how to deal with myself sometimes. Am I being friendly enough? Should I be cautious here? Are you being serious or are you winding me up? I'm not sure I've quite "got it" yet. Some of the team have been here lots of times before, so I think they do "get it". I'm very much reflecting on the day I've had, taking it all in. It's hard to put down in words.



We've had a wonderful few days of rehearsals, full of rich ideas, new songs and an epic narrative that we are beginning to create. We want to tell a universal story of someone who goes from one world to another, who experiences that new world, it's ups, it's downs, and then goes home again, fuller. We are two groups from opposite sides of the world that share a name, and finding a way to encapsulate that in a story is a mammoth task. It feels like we are edging closer. But it's not easy. Even the ways in which we create are completely different. We are on their territory so I find myself listening and following their way and feel hesitant to input at times. I wonder if they felt the same when visiting us last year?

We know we want to tell a story about a woman. We know there will be music. We know the story will feel magical. And the rest is up for grabs! It feels very collaborative and positive, and I know we all just have to trust in each other to get there now. It's exciting. It's tense. And it's electric. Much like the storms ! "

## **Samantha Bell, one of the cast of *Two Newcastle* takes us through what she's been up to in South Africa with *Curious Monkey*.**

"I've been in South Africa for a few days now so I just want to quickly bring you up to speed. We landed safe and sound in Johannesburg and spent two nights in a funky hostel, ate epic food, checked out the arts scene and just generally got a feel for the place.

On Tuesday we embarked on the three and a half hour journey to Newcastle KwaZulu Natal. We were absolutely buzzing, not just because we were getting to a new part of the country, not just because rehearsals were about to start and not just because we were going to some lovely new digs, but mostly because that night was the night we were going to be reunited with our South African friends. We all met up for a massive braai but little did we know that a mental storm was brewing. A storm that would have us seeing lightning like we'd never seen before and have water running through the electric system leaving us in complete darkness, well except for a few candles that were brought out. It was atmospheric to say the least.

### **First Day of Rehearsals**

It was so great to be back together in a room again, being creative, being playful and having lengthy discussions and debates about religion, politics, history, discrimination, travel, love and everything that it means to be human. The process had begun...

### **Second Day of Rehearsals**

We checked in with each other to see where everyone's heads were at, we did yoga, energiser games and then we did some singing. A song we wrote in Newcastle upon Tyne in 2016 and a new song that Schuppo wrote yesterday, he's so clever! Everyone in the cast is musically gifted which can be intimidating at times but it feels so amazing to be part of it.



Then we did a major writing task. Automatic writing where you write non stop until you get told to finish, then you fold your paper and pass it on to the next person.

This proved to be immensely rewarding exercise because some of the writing that came from it was just wonderfully beautiful and honest. We ended our rehearsing day by reading them all out. Off home we went tonight and Ian made an absolutely lush veggie chilli and Alice made some seriously delish guacamole to compliment it. It was insanely good. We all sat outside to eat under the dark night and the stars. Instead another storm hit, blowing a hooley, throwing down hail stones and blasting out lightning bolts. The weather here is mad!"

### **Now it's Jonluke Mckie's turn**

"Today it feels like we found the voice of the piece. We knew what the ingredients were: Testimony, allegory and music, but today it feels like we've begun to find the method by which we'll mix these up together, and (thank goodness) it seems we're cooking up a storm. Everyone in the ensemble brings something different, their skills, their history, their physicality.

### **Ingredient 1: Music**

In my spare time I sing a lot in the UK, sometimes songs I've written, sometimes in groups or choirs; it's a big part of my life. But singing in South Africa is different somehow. In the UK it takes real effort to let ourselves go when singing. Our reserved British nature telling us to be quiet: It's rude to shout, arrogant to express ourselves, and god forbid we should hit a bum note or make some other mistake- it would be terribly embarrassing for everyone involved.

Here, you're sort of buoyed up by the South Africans, by the heat, by the energy. It seems natural to let go, open up and belt it out. Having Schuppo guiding you and such a talented cast around you doesn't hurt, spine tingling harmonies are created off the top of heads, we 'dance to understand the music' and if you're non-committal or too quiet, Schuppo gives you 'The Look' and you soon step up. The collective result is beautiful.

## Ingredient 2: Fiction

We've been developing a fictional, allegorical story that deals with some of the stuff we're tackling. A girl has a call to adventure, she is to travel to a different world, embed herself in that culture and return home. We talk a lot about belonging. Trying to walk in the shoes of another culture, but only being able to see through your own cultural lens. We talk about what we bring with us when we go on a journey, what we leave behind when we come home, and what we're left with afterwards. For me, it has been fascinating to dip my toes into a culture that is at once so similar and so opposite to the place I'm from. Perhaps the phrase 'Dipping my toes' sounds diminutive and small – it's not, the experience is big and profound, but I feel that the more time I spend in South Africa the more I realize how far I am from understanding this beautiful complicated place.

## Ingredient 3: Testimony

We're just beginning to transcribe text from interviews and group discussions we've been having. The material is rich. Voices from two continents tackle their politics, their values, their beliefs. We agree, we disagree, we agree to disagree. I don't yet know how the verbatim text will be used in the piece, we're yet to discover this, but I know how fascinating our conversations have been. I'm excited to share them with our audiences.

What will come out of the whole process is still to be seen, there's a lot of work to do and many decisions to be made, but what I do know is that when you put a bunch of such talented, interesting, same-but-different artists in a room together, they're bound to cook up a storm. I hope you'll come have a taste of what we've made when the time comes to share."

## Finally. Stan Hodgson

"Hello gang,

My day to write a blog has come towards the end of our stay in South Africa, so forgive me if I stray into melancholy.

This trip was my first ever to South Africa. I'm not a well-travelled person, I can't stress enough, and so there were a lot of thoughts and anxieties rolling around my head before we set off. And, of course, a lot of my initial thoughts were ridiculous, but that doesn't mean there wasn't a host of new experiences for me to get stuck into.

We've eaten amazing South African food, watched some engrossing South African Theatre, got caught in some phenomenal South African Storms (they're like British Storms but turned up to 11!!) There's also the South African pace shift. I didn't realise this was a thing, but as someone who storms around all over the place (more often than not because I am late!), I couldn't get over how everyone just saunters at their own pace. Nobody's in a rush. It's glorious!

In many ways, Johannesburg and Newcastle KZN are like any beautiful, welcoming city. But sometimes, something will blindside you, and remind you that you are in a new place, with different customs and cultures. But, for me, one of the big joys of the 2 Newcastle's Project is actually finding the commonalities. What are those things that bind us at Curious Monkey and the group from NADO together? We've spoken a lot about being an artist, music, family and, of course, love.

So, as our time for this phase is drawing to a close, what will I take away with me? Well, for starters, we have spent every day playing music, writing and riffing together. So I'm leaving with a head full of new tunes. But, most importantly, how often do you get to meet and work with a brand new group of people, only to discover that they are all insanely talented, generous and funny? I think it's a rare thing. And I shall hold onto that on our 11 hour overnight flight on Saturday.

Til we meet again."

