



Co-creation, community and friendship through music

It is a privilege to be the Chief Executive Officer of The Springfield Project. Some days really bring this home to me and yesterday was one of those days. I am fortunate to be in this special place and humbled by the wonderful people that I work with and the children and families that we support.

In 2012 we ran our first Creative Families Festival which aimed to bring the arts to the children and families of Sparkhill, and to promote all the many benefits of the arts to a community where access to the arts is limited and families often struggle to put food on the table, let alone buy theatre tickets.



The cultural diversity of Sparkhill and the inter-faith and inter-cultural space where we find ourselves, is always a key component of our planning and creative activities. The arts help to break down barriers of language, faith, ethnicity and culture. Tapping in to, and releasing, the artistic talents that exist within the community and celebrating arts of different cultures and countries is key to our approach to supporting children, families and the community. It has played a valuable part in our work promoting community cohesion. Supporting parents to release their inner child through creativity and play can have a profound impact on family life and parenting capacity. Parents find new ways to play with, and understand, their children, which strengthens parent-child relationships and supports families to thrive through mutual attention, discovery and joy.



In 2017 we first met with B'Opera, a newly formed opera company creating work for babies and young children. We were honoured to host one of the first performances of Zoom to the Moon. Since then, we have hosted performances of Alice and The Library Tree and interactive music workshops, and B'Opera are a key feature in our annual Creative Families Festival. Zoe Challenor, one of the founders and directors of B'Opera, is our Artist in Residence. Through the Birmingham Early Years Music Consortium and the Youth Music funded Sounds of Play project, our understanding of music in the early years and the power of music in work with families has strengthened, and we have been able to share our learning and passion across the early years sector in Birmingham.

In early 2020, when the pandemic was keeping us from holding community events and we were dreaming of the future, we first mooted the idea that we could commission B'Opera to create a new opera with and for our children, an opera that was about childhood, friendship and difference, about being friends with people who are different from us. We know how important it is to explore these ideas with children, and for us to learn from children, who powerfully navigate difference every day in this super-diverse city of ours.





In partnership with ArtWorks Hall Green, and with funding from Birmingham City Council's Next Generation arts funding the foundations of a 'more in common' children's opera production were established.

In the autumn of 2021 Zoe worked with children and parents in our nurseries and our Children's Centre. Using music and song Zoe worked with children, parents and staff to explore ideas of friendship and difference. and developed the story of the piece, around a bird and a fish – different in so many ways, but also the same.

In an amazingly short time Zoe and her B'Opera colleagues took these rich and moving contributions and turned them in to a complete opera: Hello Bird, Hello Fish. Yesterday the work was performed for the first time to a specially invited audience made up of children and parents who had contributed to the creation of the work. What a powerful and moving experience for all involved.

The story of lost bird and her attempts to make friends and find somewhere to belong was performed through a combination of opera, classical music, and specially composed pieces, including kazoo's, beatboxing bees and a beautiful lullaby sung in Urdu. I know I wasn't the only one with tears in my eyes when lost bird and noisy fish recognised their connection and, using Makaton, expressed their friendship. Specialising in work with very young children, the B'Opera performers expect children to join in, move around and actively engage with the performance. They work sensitively to allow children to express themselves freely. This is what the arts are about, and what children do so well – that sense of flow and complete immersion in an experience. It's what the arts offer to many of us as adults, an opportunity to step out of ordinary life and fully exist in a space where we can be a different version of ourselves, where we feel alive in a new way.

The costumes and set were all made from recycled materials, designed and created by Rukhsana Sardar. Rukhsana was born and bred in Sparkhill and has had a successful international career in the fashion and textile industry. We were delighted to welcome Rukhsana back to Sparkhill and to benefit from her creative skills.

Following the performance, conversations were shared over food. Children and parents shared that they had been able to recognise their contribution to the opera. Many adults, including parents and staff members, shared their own sense of connection with the story and spoke of times in their lives when they felt that they did not belong, they felt different, and they did not know how to reach out to create friendships and break down barriers. For many this was a moving experience which connected them to their own childhoods. Like lost bird and noisy fish, they may have found ways to connect with others and build friendships despite differences, learning that there is always some common ground on which to build.



For me this is what The Springfield Project is about. It is a very special place where children and adults of different backgrounds, beliefs and cultures come together to find common ground and to develop and grow as individuals and as a community. Whether through opera, bhangra, visual arts or other creative medium, we come together as people who want to live and work together and want to empower, enable and enrich the lives of our children.



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