

***Hello Bird, Hello Fish!* - the start of an important conversation**  
**by Zoë Challenor - Director, B'Opera**

What struck me most about B'Opera's first sharing of *Hello Bird, Hello Fish!* was that the audience experienced it as the opening of a conversation. And they used the feedback and food session that followed, to reply. There was no preamble, no need for the carefully crafted prompt questions we'd placed on the tables between samosas and carrot sticks. Just straight in with their own stories of exclusion, of being judged for the colour of their skin or their religion, a memory of a song sung by a mother and the emotions it stirs up. A desire for these children to experience more inclusion and friendship in their lifetimes.

B'Opera's most recent project saw us running a series of collaborative workshops with the predominantly Muslim Pakistani Springfield community in Sparkhill, Birmingham, out of which we created a new musical adventure for 0-5s.

*Hello Bird, Hello Fish!* started life with a working title of *More in Common*, and beautifully fulfilled B'Opera's mission of bringing together children age 0-5 and their families, from diverse backgrounds, around a shared, high quality interactive experience of music.

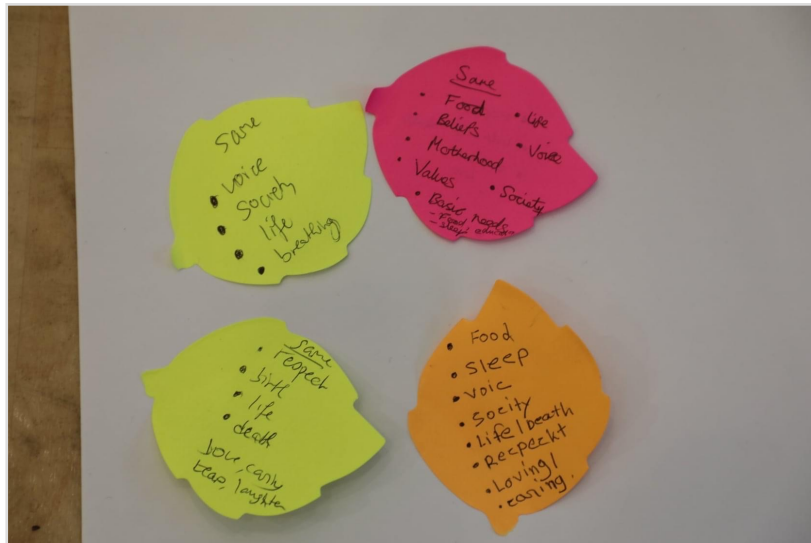
Driven by the belief that children of all backgrounds need to participate freely in cultural life and the arts, B'Opera are building a fast-growing reputation for creating community around high quality music in Birmingham.

Commissioned by Art Works Hall Green to be made with and for families from The Springfield Project, and funded through Birmingham City Council's *Next Generation* fund, the piece was devised through a programme of participatory sessions and shared at The Springfield Centre in February half term 2022.

The process brought together the Early Years expertise of The Springfield Project staff team and B'Opera, who have extensive experience in this area. Both B'Opera and The Springfield Project are partners on the Birmingham Early Years Music Consortium, which has been delivering the Youth Music funded project *Sounds of Play*.

B'Opera ran a series of co-creative workshops, designed to empower children and families to contribute their voices through a combination of open-ended prompts and stimuli - including musical, movement, verbal and play - and listening to their stories and experiences, ready to develop and incorporate them into the final piece.

### *Responses to workshop prompts on sameness and difference*



### **The Team**

The usual B'Opera team of three - Director Zoë Challenor, Producer Jacqueline White and Musical Director Phil Ypres-Smith, expanded to seven for this project.

Aliyah Wiggins joined the team as an Apprentice Artist.

Aliyah who has just taken on a paid intern role with Welsh National Opera in the Midlands, gained experience in every aspect of creating a piece of children's theatre, including attending planning meetings, co-leading collaborative workshops, co-leading the pre-performance immersive sensory workshop, designing social media campaigns, and performing in the piece.

### *B'Opera Intern Aliyah Wiggins*



Sophie Williams joined us on a work placement from Central School of Speech and Drama, bringing with her her experience of sensory play, Makaton signing and choreography. Sophie said about the project: “the experience was wonderful and inspiring. I feel a lot more confident in using song within facilitation and experimenting with sound. I adored seeing the children really join in the performance, demonstrating true theatre immersion. It raises the question - for children who may be SEN/ neuro-diverse is this the best way for them to experience theatre? It really opened my eyes. I read theory so much, it’s truly lovely to see these techniques in practice.”

We commissioned local mother and illustrator Emily Idowu to design a beautiful flyer for the piece.

*Flyer design by Emily Idowu*



B’Opera were thrilled to welcome Designer-Maker Rukhsana Sardar to the team. Raised in Sparkhill, she brought with her over 20 years of experience working in fashion and an interest in community arts. Rukhsana is in the process of setting up a creative zero waste textile business: [ecoraa.com](http://ecoraa.com) and was able to turn B’Opera’s mission of using only zero waste recycled materials into reality through her innovative costume and sensory playmat designs. When we met her, Rukhsana said, “Growing up in Sparkhill, we just weren’t exposed to classical music and instruments, and I felt so deprived that I didn’t learn anything about it. It’s important for me to be involved in this project for that reason. How do we know that there isn’t a wonderful future piano player in that audience?”

### The Story

The story explores themes of sameness and difference, and integrates with Art Works' wider ambitions for 2022, referencing the Commonwealth Games' themes of identity and home. Separated from her flock, Lost Bird is lonely and looking for a friend. Meanwhile, Noisy Fish is rejected by the shoal for fidgeting and talking when they want to do yoga in peace! Lost Bird and Noisy Fish bond over an Urdu lullaby they both learned as babies, and realise they have more in common than first meets the eye. Their friendship is strengthened when Lost Bird helps Noisy Fish out of a tight spot. *Hello Bird, Hello Fish!* is a musical adventure for children age 0-5 and their families, that celebrates finding friendship where we least expect it.

*Audience members joining in during the performance*



*"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."*

Sarah Robbins, CEO Springfield Project

Read the whole of Sarah's article about this project here: [https://www.bopera.co.uk/\\_files/ugd/545452\\_00dea4b80127463a98b3bdb0fcae9f5b.pdf](https://www.bopera.co.uk/_files/ugd/545452_00dea4b80127463a98b3bdb0fcae9f5b.pdf)



*"Me and my child really enjoyed the show. I can't believe that he (22 month old) sat through the whole show without fussing. The singing was beautiful and the whole show was very engaging. Thank you for a lovely experience."*

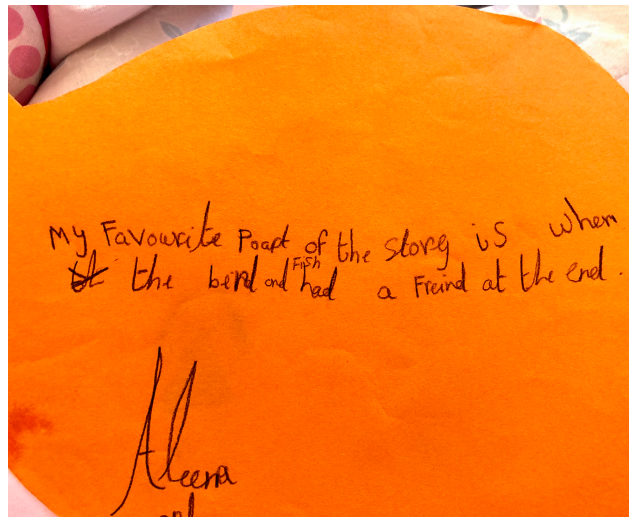
Kiran and Amaan

*"Amazing how without any words you can express so many ideas and emotions."* Audience member

*"I felt happy about the show."*

Aleena and Anayah

*Feedback fish filled in by a young audience member*



### **The Workshops**

I remember feeling nervous about our first workshop with parents at Park Road nursery. Exploring themes of sameness and difference felt somehow raw and potentially triggering - I'm deeply aware of our country's ingrained Islamophobia. It was very present in my psyche when setting up B'Opera in 2017 amid increasing polarisation in our diverse city and around the world. The desire to bring the next generation together around a shared experience of beautiful music has slowly developed and expanded into a vision of inviting audience voices into our work.

Last year I was awarded a Developing Your Creative Practice grant from Arts Council England to explore ways to invite audience voices into my work, and *Hello Bird, Hello Fish!* reflects a movement towards this actively inclusive way of working, for me as an artist, and for B'Opera.

The workshop turned out to be one of the most beautiful experiences of human connection I've had, as we brainstormed sameness, difference, and what we have in common.

I was reminded that the thread of human connection is indeed everywhere, and is not dependent on skin colour, religion, language, where we live, or anything else. I was reminded that, like the participants, I am a woman, a mother, and a person who seeks self-expression.

I learned that while we do indeed have "more in common", we may also enjoy and celebrate our differences. Two of the women taking part fed back that they were from similar parts of Pakistan, married to brothers, neighbours, have children the same age in the same nursery, and that they'd spent the time exploring all the things that make them **different** and **individual**. They enjoyed identifying, then celebrating their individuality and difference.

I learned that many of our experiences are universal and transcend perceived barriers, as I stayed behind at the end and chatted to a mum about parenting, and how to stay sane using mediation and yoga as her bright-eyed little one ran around.

#### *Workshop participants*



I am convinced that that workshop was the start of something which remains unfinished - that it was the beginning of a conversation, not the end.

We explored with the children and their families how our bird and fish would move, and marvelled at their creativity, as adults tied coloured scarves around toddlers' wrists or in their hair, giving them wings or plumage, and they flew, wheeled, soared, perched, pecked and clucked around the room.

We workshopped scenes from the emerging story at The Springfield Project's two nurseries. I remember the smiles of recognition on three-year-old faces watching wriggly, Noisy Fish who can't sit still, then the smiles of recognition on staff faces as they watched the older fish trying to stay calm in yoga class amongst the chaos.

*Zoë Challenor leads a workshop in one of the Springfield Project nurseries*



One staff member joined in our warm up games with a wonderful royal wave - a little twist of the wrist. This turned into a joke about her being the Queen, which inspired our diva Queen Bee in the story.

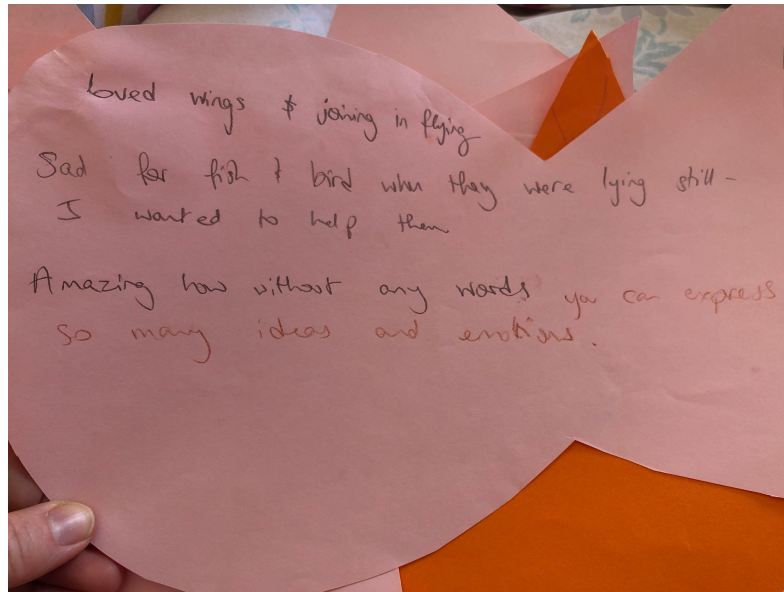
Like a conversation, the collaborative way of working became like osmosis - not just what people said or wrote on post-it notes, but the languages they spoke, jokes that were made, experiences and struggles that people shared, references to fabric and ancestors and food. The community's contributions took many, many forms. Some of them are evident in the story, some of them less visible but woven into the texture and fabric of the piece like foundation stones.

We workshopped at B'Opera too, following the same process that we asked of the Springfield Community, prompting our Musical Director to remark on how out of the comfort zone but creatively satisfying it felt.

The creative space that this kind of workshopping gave us, provided opportunity to step away from producing material to deadlines, and to reflect on our why, teasing apart some of the many strands running through what we do. We reflected on sameness and difference as unison and harmony, and how harmony is multiple unisons overlaid and sounds more interesting. We explored cacophony, chaos, not understanding other people's languages,

sign language (which we used in the finished piece), and the vast amount of communication that happens non-verbally. Interestingly, one of our audience members fed back, “Amazing how without any words you can express so many ideas and emotions.”

*“Amazing how without any words you can express so many ideas and emotions.”*



We talked about labels - white/black/autistic/on the spectrum/gay/straight/Muslim/Christian, and what these labels do - the ways in which they protect our identity and the ways in which they limit it. We discussed how “integration” can be used to attempt to iron out difference and make us all the same. We explored alternatives to an either/or binary world, where multiple possibilities exist and can be enriching, and the power of unifying forces like our love for our children.

This collaborative way of working while immensely rich and rewarding, is also intensive of time and labour. So much work happens between workshop and final performance. Reviewing and digesting workshop material, letting ideas swirl and take shape, allowing the lyrics it inspired to come through, and the music, writing, devising, mapping, arranging, composing, improvising, searching for complementary material, communicating the vision to designers and other artists for them to express in costume, set and props... It’s a scary, messy, time-consuming, but also thrilling process.

### **So, what next?**

*Hello Bird, Hello Fish!* has grown out of the Springfield Community and will be shared there twice more, on Saturday 28th May at their Creative Families Festival, and at the Commonwealth Live Sites in Sparkhill Park on 30th July.

And then we will develop it, investigating what it looks like to involve future audiences.

### Children's Voices

In an adult-centred world, children are often perceived as “noisy”, and it is rare for them to be truly listened to. Receiving the message that their voices are inconvenient has far-reaching implications as they grow into adults.

As musicians working with children in the Early Years, we are powerfully placed to bring about change through the way we interact with children and families, teaching children that their voices matter.

*Hello Bird, Hello Fish!* has opened an important conversation. We thank Art Works Hall Green for their support, Birmingham City Council's Next Generation fund, as well as Birmingham Forward Steps, Sounds of Play and Youth Music for funding this project, Sarah Robbins for instigating it, and The Springfield Project staff for believing in and supporting it. We have valued the chance to get to know the Sparkhill community, and thank them for their incredible engagement with this project, and the generosity with which they shared their voices with us.

[www.bopera.co.uk](http://www.bopera.co.uk)

<http://artworkshallgreen.co.uk/>

<https://www.springfieldproject.org.uk/>

View a short 2 min film about Hello Bird, Hello Fish! here: <https://youtu.be/Z9qSoSbdWjc>