

## Project Overview

Sumner Women's Drama Workshop began in 1984 when a group called "Mothers Tongues" from New Peckham Varieties women's drama group came to perform at the Welcome Nursery on the Sumner Estate.

The piece they were doing, called "The Drum Game" allowed the audience to interrupt the action and join in discussion about its content. The Welcome nursery women greatly enjoyed the performances and expressed a wish to be able to 'do some drama' themselves.

So NPV's drama worker Teresa Early started to visit Sumner Estate every Thursday evening to work with the new group: they were going to "do some Drama".

But things here did not proceed according to a standard plan. The idea of doing the usual type of drama workshop - for example some exercises, maybe a bit of an improvisation, maybe reading some scripted stuff - simply did not happen. The women were filled to the brim with stories – a catalogue of horrors which had never found a listener. For ten weeks we talked. The teapot was on the table and stories were told. More and more the topic centred on the way that the women, and their children, were forced to live. Their homes, if such they could be called, came perilously near to being uninhabitable.

The room is too damp for the baby to sleep in. Doors are missing. The drains don't work. Don't work? – That meant they quickly reached overload and when they did this the contents of the drains flowed back into the ground floor flats. Moreover, the entire blocks were infested with cockroaches and German beetle, which had a superhighway to visit all residents through the pipework of heating system, which provided for single boilers to access, and heat, every apartment on the estate.

One of the reasons that the discussions were so long was that most of the members at first thought that they were the only people who had these problems; - the infestation, the drain situation, the damp and dangerous wiring. They were "bad women" you see, mainly single parents or new-ish immigrants with children and little or no earned incomes. They were not going to speak of these problems with their housing to anyone, in case "the social" came and took away their children. Maybe these conditions might be all they deserved, certainly they thought that the authorities saw them this way. How could they tell anyone?

The talking changed all this. It was only us. As the stories came out, first cautiously, and then with growing confidence, one after another admitted to having the same problems. It became obvious to everyone that the problems were not personal.

A great energy was thus created, which carried the group through working out the common threads of their experiences and binding them into a story. First the women improvised, and then created, rehearsed and polished the play, and then bravely, six women performed it to a live audience. The play was never fully scripted, and the words are the words of the women themselves, as they spoke them in life, and in performance. Some Councillors from LB Southwark saw the performance, and offered to fund us to film it.

The venue for the filming was obviously the local Sumner Estate. We needed a typical flat to shoot the story in. I went in and out of the housing office requesting an empty property for the filming, until one officer, fed up with my pestering, (and maybe fed up with Housing workers' cavalier ways?), gave in. She handed me the keys to a flat which was listed as "ready to be transferred to a new tenant" the next day.

There was no need for us to exaggerate the disgusting condition of that property – it was well recognised. My local residents, who had proudly now become brand new actors, had seen (and smelt) it all before.

We filmed, and after I had had a first pretty gruelling experience of film editing (ten hours of film into 29 minutes, slap on budget of £5,000) I handed it over to a Southwark officer and we all sat down and watched ourselves with much laughter. It may be in a cupboard at LB Southwark still!