

shakespeare in the favelas

Drama education specialist Kieron Jones travels to the favelas (shantytowns) of Brazil with his partner Mariana Carvalho; his challenge is to get young Afro-Brazilians from the gang-ridden favelas (shantytowns) performing Shakespeare.

Mariana was crying. Johayne told us that he wanted to take us on a walk through two favelas, which are currently at war. Only AfroReggae can cross the lines in the dirt that separate the drug gangs. Mariana didn't want to go. She grew up in Brazil hearing on the news about all the violence in the favelas and she was really scared. In fact the day we arrived in Rio de Janeiro a young mother and her son were killed in cross fire as they played together in the narrow streets. I told her that we would be safe with Johayne, but as she quite rightly pointed out, what if something happened while we were there. What if one of the gangs decided to invade? What if the police started to invade? Johayne was very

honest about the situation and said that he could not guarantee that nothing will happen, that's impossible. There's always a risk, because there's a war going on. Young guys stand on the streets with guns. Mariana's mother and father didn't want her to go. I hadn't told my parents where I was going, so I didn't have that kind of pressure. She spoke to Johayne about her concerns and decided it was best if she didn't go. If you are scared and look scared then that can bring the wrong sort of attention when you are walking through the favelas. So I went alone.

Johayne Hildefonso is the artistic director for AfroReggae. I met Johayne in London back in April, when I took part in a workshop held by AfroReggae for teachers, community project workers and drama practitioners. AfroReggae are a cultural group who are becoming world famous for their work in the favelas of Brazil. The favelas are one of the most violent places on earth. There are over 800 favelas in Rio and there are

always some there at war. Drug barons control most, if not all of them. Lines are drawn in the dirt and you are not allowed to cross to the other side. If you do, then you get shot by one of the many "guards" that stand on duty. They hold a grip over the communities that live there; most people living in fear, but having no alternative. In 1993, 21 innocent people were killed in the streets of one favela called Vigario Geral. It was a revenge attack, not by one of the many drug gangs, but by the police.

The massacre sent shock waves around Brazil, because it turned out that the Vigario Geral drug baron had killed a corrupt police captain and three of his colleagues the previous day, so the police sent in their firing squad to get their own back. At this time AfroReggae was a newspaper dedicated to raising public awareness of the troubles in the favelas. After this horrific attack, they decided that more must be done. The building, where they laid out the 21 dead bodies, turned into a community ➡



← centre. They started providing capoeira, percussion and recycling classes. In the eye of the storm, they gave people in that community some happiness, a little hope, a place to remember and to move forward. It's an incredible story and AfroReggae have become hugely successful. They now have 64 projects going on in different favelas around Rio with over 2000 people involved. They have a hip-hop band that tours the world, spreading the words of peace and freedom and raising awareness for the people of the favelas. It's very hard not to stand back and admire their achievements and I was very keen to go and work with the young people in that very community centre where it all began 13 years ago.

I met Johayne in Copacabana and we caught a taxi. It was a 40-minute car ride to the edge of the favela where I was going to do my workshop. As we drove in the car Johayne gave me some tips on what to do and what not to do. Without Mariana I had to rely on my pigeon Portuguese to get through this experience. Johayne was very patient with me though and through a combination of repetition,

paraphrasing and plenty of hand gestures we managed to communicate: no filming on the streets, don't look at anyone holding a gun, just stroll about casually, looking around, nice and relaxed. Easier said than done, I thought. I must be honest here, at this point in the taxi, as we left the shiny high-rise offices of central Rio and took the highway through the heart of the favelas, I was nervous and quite scared.

I thought Johayne was going to be more relaxed, but I could sense the adrenaline pumping through his veins too. This man goes there almost every day to work with the young people. It doesn't matter how often you do it; it's still risky. I kept my cool as best I could, remembering what Paul Heritage, the director of the People's Palace Project (the wing of the British council responsible for bringing AfroReggae to England and frequent visitor to the favelas) had told me – if you are with AfroReggae, then you should be all right.

The taxi pulled up at a petrol station and we got out. We walked over the bridge, over the railway lines that provide a sort of concrete moat for

the favela, and down into the narrow streets of Vigario Geral. As we crossed this concrete border Johayne explained that this was the only way into the favala. No cars pass down these roads, only people. I was wandering who was watching us as we entered. I couldn't see anyone, but to be honest I wasn't looking too hard. Everything seemed to be very tranquil. The houses in this concrete jungle weren't ugly; basic concrete buildings with corrugated iron roofs, most of them two floors high.

The roads were dirt, but they weren't dirty in the sense that there was no rubbish on the floor. In fact it was a lovely sunny day. We stopped at a corner shop and I was introduced to a smiley grey haired man stood behind the counter. He was in his 60s, has obviously lived there all his life, and was clearly a good acquaintance of Johayne. He greeted me warmly and flashed me a smile, which revealed a surprising array of gold letters. I didn't get the chance to read what they said – I hoped they spelled out "Bem vindo" (welcome) but I'm not sure.

Inside the AfroReggae centre, twelve young people were

rehearsing a play. The centre was basically a favela house like any other, entered through concrete stairs off a little side street. The room itself though had been painted bright colours of yellow, red and green. Even though this was the shrine to the 21 people killed in 1993, they wanted the place to be bright and joyful. One of the walls was mirrored, just like any professional dance studio anywhere in the world. The young people were all in their late teens and early twenties and obviously very passionate about their performance. It was very physical and involved lots of ensemble work. Johayne explained to me that they had written the play together and it was about conflict and war. In October they will perform their play in an area that divides two favelas at war.

The group consisted of young people from lots of different favelas, including two girls from the warring favelas. This was a true sign that the AfroReggae emblem was one of protection. Only AfroReggae could bring together people from different favelas in this way. Some of the girls were wearing AfroReggae t-shirts and I should imagine that they had to wear them so they could enter this

favela without causing any friction. I started to film them rehearsing and couldn't help but film outside the window, so fascinated I was with this whole experience. I couldn't quite believe that this area was so dangerous. Everything seemed so peaceful. I hadn't seen any trouble and hadn't seen any guards or people with guns. I was zooming in on an interesting piece of graffiti in what looked like a makeshift basketball court opposite when Johayne ran over to me and pulled the camera down from the window. No filming outside he repeated to me and gave me that sort of look, which made sure I didn't do it again. A quick reality check for this "gringo".

The workshop went brilliantly. All the young people were great fun and impressed me with their drama skills. I could tell that they perform a lot and Johayne told me that they come together twice a week to rehearse. As a drama practitioner it's always a joy to work with people who give 100% and I quickly realised that working with them was basically like working with a professional company back home. They took a lot of pride in their art and embraced

all the activities that I threw at them. They were great physical performers. I only had one hour with them and decided that together we would look at "The Tempest". This is because in the UK we are celebrating the bi-centenary of the abolition of slavery act and I thought that the themes of slavery and revenge set on an exotic island would appeal to their culture and roots. Also I thought the tempestuous favelas would prove a fascinating backdrop for the play.

First of all we recreated King Alonso's ship caught in the storm with everyone being thrown into the oceans. Then, by using our bodies and voices, we improvised an exotic island where Miranda falls in love with the handsome Prince Ferdinand – I have performed this workshop in over 100 schools in the UK and I must be honest here, they produced the best bird sounds I have ever heard! During the workshop I got them to create their own Caliban using their bodies to create an image of this half-man half-fish. It really was a joy to behold. We talked about the slavery of Caliban and how they felt about the character in relation to their African roots. →

← At one stage I was Prospero and they were all Calibans and we insulted each other using Shakespeare's words. It made me think about how the penny stinkers and rich people at the Globe would have reacted to Caliban and the way he is treated. I'm sure they would have joined in with the jeering. Fascinating to think how life changes and how Shakespeare not only reflected the attitudes



are such stuff as dreams are made on and our little life is rounded with a sleep". This seemed

of the day but through showing people life on the stage also allowed them to question what is right and wrong, which is, of course, the first step to affecting change. At the end of the workshop I asked them to use Brazilian dance to bring to life the spirits conjured up by Prospero to celebrate the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand. Afterwards I told them about Prospero's reaction to stop the merriment and reflect on life's brevity "We

particularly poignant to these young people from the favelas where lives are taken everyday. They then stood up and formed a circle and sang me a song.

I didn't understand the words, but the way they sang it, was so honest and sincere. It was very powerful. A hymn of hope. As I stood there and listened I thought about the room where we were standing, where on this very floor, 21 innocent bodies from the

massacre of 1993 were laid out. I suddenly became aware of the suffering and the pain that had existed in this room and the hatred and desire for revenge that continues outside the windows. I wandered who else in the favela was standing and listening with me at that moment, what they had seen and whom they had lost. At the end of "The Tempest", Prospero forgives his enemies, he tells them "the rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance." I felt very fortunate indeed to have shared Shakespeare's final play with young people who truly understand the affects of revenge and try through drama to show their people that they must forgive in order to live in peace with each other.

On my way back to catch

the bus to inner-city Rio with Johayne I passed a guard. He was black, in his late teens, wearing smart trainers, basketball type clothing, and shaved head. In fact he could have been straight out of a hip-hop music video. I only knew he was a guard when I saw his huge silver revolver, like the ones you see in the movies.

I followed Johayne's instructions and walked casually and even though it was really hard not to, I didn't stare at him or his gun. I then suddenly realised that where the guard was standing was exactly the spot that I had been filming through the window of the AfroReggae centre about a few hours earlier. No wonder Johayne ran over to me. He thought I was filming the guard. Thank God, the guard was taking a break when I was stood at the window. If not, well, the last journalist caught filming here was apparently shot and killed. As we crossed back over the bridge from Vigario Geral, I heard rapid gunfire begin behind me to the left. It seemed about a hundred metres away. My instinct was to stop and see what was going on, but Johayne didn't stop so neither did I.

On the bus with Johayne, I felt a huge sense of relief. The favelas are very dangerous, you only need to pick up the newspaper everyday and read about all the murders to know that. Back in 1993 most children from the favelas wanted to be guards and work for the drug trafficking trade. It's easy to see the attraction. At a young age they could have money, power and all the cool clothes and trainers they could ever want. Today, thanks to the work of AfroReggae and similar community projects, the story is vastly different and even though the wars continue, some young people stand strong and that's very empowering to anyone who has the pleasure of meeting and working with them.

Just like Prospero and Miranda, people living in the favelas have been cast away from the riches and luxuries of modern society. No doubt some of them have been betrayed, cheated upon and have reason to be angry and desire for revenge. However just like Prospero, AfroReggae and their theatre group study and master their magic of art and music to overcome their problems and help their people. In "The Tempest", Prospero at the end

asks his spirit servant Ariel to magic them a ship so they can return home safely to Italy. He has been successful and taken back the Dukedom of Milan that was stolen from him by his treacherous brother Antonio and realises that the fighting must stop. As the AfroReggae group travel across the favelas to perform their play about war, I will pray that the magic of their art will cast a spell of peace upon the warring drug gangs, that one day the people will win back their freedom from the drug barons and reveal to them a brave new world!



"Shakespeare in the favelas" is available on DVD as a documentary. For more information about this, Kieron's workshops and Shakespeare resources please visit www.shakespeare-works.com