

arts

Culture shock

Jo Nightingale hears how a disused mill in Bradford will be the setting for a new play portraying the city's experience of migration, community identity and diversity

Once home to 350 mills, Bradford's industrial strength was closely linked to migration, particularly after the second world war. As markets changed and competition from service industries and overseas grew, factories sought ever-cheaper labour abroad, recruiting Eastern European volunteers, Italian women and, latterly, Asian men. The Mill – City of Dreams, by Jonathan Holmes and Madani Younis, will tell the true stories of those living and working in the city, from the first waves of migration to the present day.

"I was struck by the epic stories of economic migration, displaced peoples and political refugees who, alongside its proud indigenous communities, have come to call Bradford home," writer-director Younis says. "The economic success of the city historically depended on the communities who took up the (mostly manual) work demanded by the textile industry. Migrants' histories and movements have contributed to Bradford's diversity and vitality, and this project aims to celebrate that."

Local production company Freedom

Studios worked with West Yorkshire Archives to train schoolchildren and community groups to interview migrant and indigenous groups about their experiences. A community cast of 20 was then assembled, to join professional performers from the origin countries of many Bradford migrants and re-tell the stories gathered.

The producers will stage the performance "promenade-style" in the closed Drummond's Mill in Manningham, an area now often associated with prostitution and the Bradford riots. "The mills speak to and about the landscape that surrounds them," explains Holmes, whose play *Katrina*, about survivors of the Louisiana hurricane, was staged in a five-storey London warehouse. "If you stand still long enough in their shells the sounds of machinery, men, women, children and hope still reverberate."

As recently as the early 1960s Bradford's mills still employed nearly a third of the country's 160,000 textile employees, but over the last decade the number has fallen to less than 1,000. So have the removal of a common *raison d'être* and increased



Engaging communities in Bradford with new play *The Mill*

competition for jobs and housing undermined Bradford's success as a multicultural city?

"Bradford functioned fairly well in the mid to late 20th century, partly because industry acted as a kind of glue," Holmes says. "Since the decline of the textile business the situation has worsened, as encapsulated by the riots several years ago, but really the new factors in the equation are the poverty, unemployment, lack of opportunity and neglect."

"As in many places, economic and power inequalities mean indigenous and migrant communities often feel disconnected from one another, geographically and socially," Younis agrees.

But the writers deny David Cameron's recent suggestion that "state multiculturalism" has encouraged separate cultures and the possibility of extremism.

"The notion that multiculturalism was ever an official state policy is simply not true," Younis says.

"Where local councils have funded a few facilities for minority ethnic

groups it has been to give them a leg up – the confidence to engage with society on the basis of equality.

"Over the last nine months I've seen how many grassroots community organisations are now acting as a tangible motor for change, drawing once disconnected people together. Communities which existed on the edges of society are now slowly becoming engaged at its centre."

The writers are hopeful that their play will broaden local support for cohesive multiculturalism, rather than simply preaching to the converted. "Any debate in Bradford about such issues has to include all the voices to make sense, so I hope the converted will come," says Holmes. "But we hope that staging the play in the heart of communities with little history of play-going, and telling stories connected to their own histories, will attract and engage new audiences."

The Mill – City of Dreams, 29 March – 16 April, Drummonds Mill, Manningham, Bradford.

