

9 words for Offsite 9

Bobby Tiwana interviews Omar Haq and Ishtiaq Hussain

- Bobby: Hello I'm Bobby Tiwana, I'm a Creative Producer of Live Performance, the occasional short film and a hand full of podcasts about a thing or two. In this podcast I will be talking to contemporary artists commissioned as part of Offsite 9 to complement the touring British Art Show 9 in Wolverhampton. Welcome to 9 words.
- Bobby: Today I am joined by artist Ishtiaq Hussain and producer Omar Haq. Today we are using inspire as the key word for discussion. So, let's start with, Ishtiaq, can you tell me a bit about yourself? What do you do as an artist?
- Ishtiaq: So, myself I'm an artist for VV. I've been doing it now for 10 years now. I've just had my 10-year anniversary from 2011 to 2021. So, I wanted to decide to set up more workshops and training, for people to develop their skills, their VV skills so I'm aiming for that, so Omar here he set up, he joined in with the Offsite 9 and he asked me to be a part of it and I agreed to do the performance on March 12th and I'm really looking forward to that.
- Bobby: So, what is VV?
- Ishtiaq: So, VV is a theatrical performance with a storyline and it's also iconic and expressive and it includes facial expressions and body movement. So yeah, that's VV as a whole. It's not like BSL. BSL has grammar and language and linguistics. But VV, it doesn't have any of that, there's no grammar and there's no language it is purely visual and imaginative. Like artwork, like drawing there's no grammar, it's just, you have a look at it, and you can tell what it is, similar to the visual vernacular.
- Bobby: And Omar what about yourself as a producer, do you want to tell me a bit about yourself.
- Omar: Yeah sure. So, I've lived in Wolverhampton all my life. I've grown up here. I got involved with the university and whilst I was, when I was studying for my degree, and I got involved in a lot of voluntary

works: planning events and performances and also football tournaments. When I heard about Offsite 9, I decided to apply for the funding. So, I really wanted to setup a VV performance and hope to inspire people to learn what VV is and how to improve on it and also to grow the community. So that's why I wanted to be involved in this project and I really wanted to start growing the community.

Bobby: What do you mean by growing the community?

Omar: So when I was younger about 1990s, when I was in school I heard that a lot of people, the deaf community was really strong in that area and then when I left school and got into college I started to notice the deaf community was lessening in number and the numbers were just getting fewer and so I was thinking about that and then I decided I want, my aim is to get the community, community numbers back up. Because I really miss the deaf community, what it was like when I was younger it was marvellous and also, I want deaf people to be a strong community like equal to hearing people.

Bobby: You said in the nineties, where in particular, you also mentioned when you're at school, so are we talking about a neighbourhood or town or both.

Omar: So, in the 1990s I was at school and some people who could sign taught me how to communicate and then when I moved into the high school, that's where I first met my deaf teacher, he taught me through communication firstly. And he taught me about BSL, he taught me about the language getting recognized and that really intrigued me, and I learnt a lot and he was the best teacher I had out of everyone because, I could communicate with him. He was the first person I could communicate with really and that just made my life a lot easier. And so, my key point is to get good communication and make it easier for me to communicate with people.

Bobby: For the record do you want to share that teacher's name and the name of the school.

Omar: Yeah sure. His name was Peter Halliwell. Peter Halliwell, so he was my first role model really, the way he taught was really interesting and when I left school I got involved with the university as I was doing my degree and that's when I decided I really wanted to be part of the Wolverhampton deaf community and that was the first time I met Ish, I was about eighteen or nineteen. I first met him at a Wolverhampton football game. And he taught me about the deaf world and deaf culture. And as I was teaching, he really inspired me and gave me a rich understanding of deaf culture. So, I really have to thank him for everything that I learned about that.

Bobby: Why do you think the community, the deaf community has become smaller, you say you know why has it decreased over the years, from the time you were at school to now?

Omar: Really there's a lot of reasons, firstly I think a big major effect on it was the Conservative, the government, party in politics. So, when the Labour Party was in control, university was free to attend and when the Conservatives took over, they changed it to you had to pay, every year, nine thousand I think it is. And so, a lot of students struggled with that, and the numbers dropped, so when I finished, that just happened when I left so I was quite lucky but unfortunately, I lived in Wolverhampton so I enjoyed meeting different people from different areas, especially now another reason with lockdown happening the community is pretty much vanished. So that's why I wanted to set this event to get it back to the old times and build that community again.

Ishtiaq: Do you mind if I add something?

Bobby: No. Please do.

Ishtiaq: So yeah, Omar was right on that part. Myself years ago, I lived here before as well I grew up here as well and it was a really strong sense of community and there were a lot of deaf groups here. And they were all BSL users. And so, when this university set up a new course, a Deaf Studies and Interpreting BSL and English Translating, that was very popular and also the students, hearing students were included in that course as well. So, it was just perfect interaction. So yeah, Omar was right about that it's mainly

linked to politics really, the tuition fees they added extra costs which made people wanting to attend fewer. So, I'm sure you know a lot of mainstream schools have PHUs – partially hearing unit. A PHU which is a partially hearing unit and before they were quite big in number, they were quite prominent. But now even their numbers are getting less. We found out the reason is 'cause deaf people don't really live in close proximity to each other. Instead of paying for the child to get a taxi to a far school they try and cut the cost and keep it local so they would rather keep the child local to the area just to save money really which ends up with a lot of isolated deaf children. And which also means the community in Wolverhampton as well was decreasing. So that affected the community a lot.

Bobby: Can you tell me about the project? How did you come up with the idea? You talked about wanting to bring, increase the community and also bring the community together Omar? How did you, between you, come up with the idea for the show?

Omar: So yeah, I had a really long think about it. And I finally picked out an idea. And then I finally picked the title to be the Wolverhampton motto, which is *Out of Darkness Cometh Light*, so I thought that is a perfect example for this. Because not long ago like Ish was saying the deaf community was really predominant here and it's just lessened. So, my aim for Out of Darkness Cometh Light is like how the community decreased and I want to get back to how it was, slowly but surely grow to what it was 20 years ago and so I thought that that title really suits the project. And I hope it brings back, brings Deaf people to the community and also hearing people to the community as well. So, they can learn about what it is to be deaf, what deaf culture is, and I want to help hearing people realise that they can be a part of the community as well and hopefully it inspires a big change. And also, to encourage people to not let deaf children be kept at home alone and to give them the right support, in the right schools so they grow their confidence and have a good sense of identity and if your positive not just isolated, alone. Because when they do find BSL they will be really shocked and realise that all their life has been barriers

really. So yeah, I'm really trying to instil that message into people through performance.

Ishtiaq: And can I also add to that as well? Omar's project is fantastic he's organised it really well. It links in with society and the deaf community because the pandemic, the coronavirus pandemic has been really awful and people have been isolated at home, with no communication, it's been barriers and not understanding TV, the news broadcasts. Some people might be able to read subtitles, others might not, others can't read the newspapers so all that time people being stuck at home has had a dramatic effect on people, there's been a lot of people rushed into Mental Health Institutes and finally recently it was slowly but surely getting everything back together, back to normal sorry and encouraging people to get back out there and live life. But now there's not really much entertainment around so it's a really good opportunity to set up this project and this show so people can come and watch and be entertained. So yeah, we are hoping for that. Bring the community back.

Bobby: So, what actually happens in the show? What's the story, stories?

Ishtiaq: So, there will be four different, there will be four different shows and the first one is experience with life in lockdown, so talking about what Ish was talking before about feeling alone and isolated at home. The second one is evolution of technology and how deaf lives have changed with the addition of technology, has it made life easier, has it made life harder, so that's gonna give you a bit of an understanding. The third one is Wolverhampton history, linked with football, just to give you a kind of upbeat happy show. The fourth one is linked with the Wolverhampton six. There was a protest, a famous protest to recognise BSL, there were six people who were arrested, linked with that protest and one of them was me. You are probably wondering why they locked me up, well they locked me up because we protested to have BSL recognised and it was in Wolverhampton, here. We were just over the road there by the church and I was doing the speech and at that time it was awful weather, it was tipping it down and everyone was leaving the protest and there was not much attention being

shown on us. So, I thought what was the point, there wasn't really much people out and so I was thinking why are we protesting today, it just felt it wasn't worth it anymore. So, we walked around, we walked down this road to a roundabout to the island in the middle of the road and we decided why don't we block the roundabout, block the exits to get a little attention. And at the same time the Wolves football ground was having a game, so they were really packed, and we had blocked this roundabout. There was buses trying to get past, there was people trying to get past and the police were by football ground and no one could get to us because it was so busy that we blocked off pretty much the whole road and there was one guy who was in a wheelchair and he got off his wheel chair and he lied down on the road so the bus driver couldn't get past and then the police finally arrived and they were trying to sort it out and telling everyone to get out the way, move. And we just said "Sorry, I don't know what you're saying, we can't understand you." The police were really trying to communicate with us, and we were like "Sorry we can't communicate with you." And we were getting frustrated as well so we were asking another police officer to come over and he could sign. He had BSL stage 1 which is basic sign language, but he was like right. And he was like "Can you move?" like really vague actions. And we were like "Okay firstly can I explain what we are here for?" And the Policeman was like okay then and I was just talking to him normally in BSL, like fluent BSL. The policemen was shocked he didn't know what I was saying, I said to the policemen sorry 'can you please bring BBC News so I can do a little speech to them' and the policeman just didn't have a clue what I was saying, I was talking just normally in BSL and the policeman was asking just "Please slow down," and I said again, I repeated it again "Can you please bring BBC News over here so I can tell them what we want to say?" And the policeman was starting to get a bit frustrated, and he was talking to the other officers, and then he just went "Right, that's it!" And we were just standing there, we weren't violent or anything. We were just standing there explaining and they started to push us and move us out the way. Some of us fell over and he pushed me as well and I was standing there firmly and

then he went "Right, that's it," and he grabbed us and he threw us in the van, the police threw us in the back of the van and we were thinking why are they forcing us in here, we were only just talking to them and it was awful. And they put us in the van and wheeled us off, took us, locked us all up. Six of us, there were five deaf people, and one was hearing people in the cell. And they locked us up. And the one hearing person they didn't lock them up, we were speaking "why not?" Well because the deaf people couldn't communicate with the police, so they locked us up and the hearing person he could communicate with the police and so they just had the interview straight away, resolved it and let him go. Whereas for us we had to wait for an interpreter to arrive. And it took something like six or seven eight hours.

Bobby: Wow!

Ishtiaq: It felt like we'd been treated differently, it was oppression to be honest.

Bobby: What year was this?

Ishtiaq: From off the top of my head, I think I'm pretty sure it was 2001. And finally, when we got out everyone else who was at the protest was waving at us. And they were all celebrating us, coming here, giving us hugs and we felt really special. And a few weeks later we had to go to the magistrate courts and I wasn't expecting it to be as packed as it was, loads of deaf people were there, waiting to watch it, protesting outside the court and we had T-shirts on saying 'Free the Wolves Six' and the back of the T-shirt said 'BSL recognise it now'. And the magistrate court heard this outside, and they dropped the charges and let us all go. All six of us were just let off. And it was a good thing but at the same time was it worth it, I was a little bit disappointed that they dropped the charges because I wanted to get recognised...get more recognition. Although at the time I was happy but looking back at it now it's kind of like they pushed us, pushed it to the side a bit. I wanted to go against them and appeal it and show them what my right is and how I was oppressed by the police and looking back at it I should have carried on with it but 20 years later and in London recently they did, we're protesting again for the BSL act so that

was recently. So that means that all this time and we are still fighting for the same thing.

Bobby: Correct me if I'm wrong did I hear recently that it will be recognised as a national language. May be two or three weeks ago now I read that I think.

Omar: Yeah, it will be yes that's coming yeah. So at the moment they've handed in the bill to Parliament and it's already past the first reading and the second reading as well, it's passed both first and second reading and now we are waiting for the third reading which will be on the eighteenth of March, hopefully we get through to parliament on that, and then it will be moved on to the parliament of law, to the next stage so it's a long process.

Bobby: What will it mean to be recognised, for BSL to be recognised as a national language?

Omar: Well, it's our language, in this country you've got like English, Welsh, Gaelic and they should add BSL as well because that should be another language of the UK. That's just one gap that's missing for communication. So, we need it to be recognised.

Ishtiaq: So, he's right on the BSL Act. BSL Act is more for deaf people for, other languages like Spanish or French, what we learn in this country, but we don't learn BSL which is already in this country. So, we need to focus on what's already in this country instead of what's abroad.

Bobby: Ishtiaq or Omar, do either of you know how many BSL users we have in the country, roughly?

Omar: Recently I think on the BBC show See Hear they said that there was about 250,000 BSL users in in the UK so yeah, that's an announcement that they did recently. But funny deaf BSL users is about 80,000, but 250,000 people includes hearing people, some partially hearing so yeah, interpreters as well.

Bobby: You mentioned See Hear, Omar mentioned See Hear, I thought See Hear had been decommissioned. Is See Hear still produced?

Ishtiaq: No no, it's still on TV, I think they do a new episode once every month. Last Wednesday at 8 o'clock in the morning on BBC See Hear did do a show and they were speaking about the London BSL Act. And Jamal the interpreter [in the room] was on that show on Wednesday and one of my daughters Tanisha was on there too. And she was mentioning about me and the Wolverhampton Six on there, so I was surprised to see that on there, it was really good to see.

Bobby: Presumably you'll know many years ago See Hear was filmed here for a number of years, at the Lighthouse.

Omar: Yeah, the Lighthouse yeah so before I think it was every year deaf people used to go there every year for Deaf Fest, that was held there.

Bobby: It was around the time in the late 90s, 98/99. I used to work at the Communication Support Unit at the university as a note taker. It chimes with what Ishtiaq was saying, you know that there was a lot of students here, studying deaf studies, studying BSL. Like the socials that you said on Thursdays I remember going to, I think it was the Royal Exchange you know, London [Royal Exchange London] that pub. Where there'd be lots of deaf students, lots of interpreters, a real mix and it felt like a really strong centre for the deaf in the country. So, I know exactly the vibe, you know, you're talking about.

Ishtiaq: So definitely Wolverhampton University that's a key point in the deaf community in in the UK and one is also Preston as well they've got a very strong deaf community and also Bristol. So those three places I would say are the main points for a strong deaf community. But sadly, Bristol University has closed down that, the course has closed down. I'm not sure if it's through funding, I'm not really sure of the reason but Preston is still going strong, and Wolverhampton also is still also surviving.

Bobby: I wanted to ask can we talk about ethnicity and deaf culture. So, you're both of Pakistani origin? Is that correct?

Ishtiaq/

Omar: Yes, that's correct.

Bobby: How has it been, being deaf in the Pakistani community, is it different from the mainstream community?

Ishtiaq: Well, my experience, I have experienced being deaf and being in a Pakistani community all my life, well I grew up in Britain. I had a British education, and a lot of the Pakistanis that were brought up in Britain we've kind of had a similar upbringing, it is more British than Pakistani. Most Pakistani's growing up in Britain speak English as well so, it's quite the same with deaf people growing up in Britain. I did go to Pakistan recently and I met a lot of deaf people in Pakistan. And it really hit me because their sign language is completely different and their facial expressions are completely different, their body language is different, and I was confused because I was just sitting there thinking we are both deaf, but we've got two completely different languages. And after a while I kind of cracked it, I sussed it, I realised how to communicate with them and made an incredible bond with them. I ended up staying there for 10 months, with those guys and it was amazing and when I got back to England I kind of picked up the habit of Pakistani sign language so people British people would come up to me and be signing to me and I'd be like "Ah, I didn't mean that." And I was changing my signs, and they would ask "What does that mean, what's that mean?" And I was like "That's just Pakistani sign language." It took me a while to adjust back, it took me about a month to adjust back to BSL, to proper BSL. Like my mind the two languages kind of just merged. I asked hearing people "You know when you speak English right, but you can also speak Pakistani language as well, how does your mind keep it separate?" [Ishtiaq] "My mind can keep it separate but sometimes they do get intermingled." And I thought you know what, that's the same with sign language, British and Pakistani sign language.

Bobby: Absolutely. I speak obviously English, but I grew up in a household that speaks Punjabi. That was my mum and dad's first language, and of course we speak interchangeably some English words, some Punjabi words without thinking. And of course, there can be mistakes.

- Ishtiaq: Yes. Exactly the same yeah. That's exactly how I felt when I come back from Pakistan. And also, Omar as well, he is profoundly British and so when me and him talk we speak only in BSL but when I'm speaking to someone else with Pakistani sign language I kind of use both.
- Omar: Can I just add as well what Ish was saying was completely true I've met a lot of people Pakistani people who were born in Pakistan and when they move here and they've moved here in a late teenage age and when I communicate with them I notice that they've still got a lot of Pakistani Sign Language in their vocabulary, and whenever I point it out they always say "It's a bad habit, I need to break out of it." And I've also got myself a lot family in Pakistan so I would love to go to go to Pakistan and meet deaf people there, meet the deaf community there and to get a better idea of what it's like for them and a better idea of how they live. And there's a lot of Pakistani people who moved here to this country who still speak Pakistani Sign Language and they don't speak English in this country so it's quite similar in that sense.
- Bobby: Are there any role models in the deaf community, for younger deaf people that you can think of?
- Omar: So yeah, now nowadays there is quite a lot of deaf role models because now there is a wide range of careers that deaf people are pursuing. Before, in my time there was very few deaf run businesses. Later on, I think about after 1990s it just grew, enormously. There's a lot of deaf run businesses now. So now the younger deaf people looking up they take them as role models, and they also set up stuff as well and that encourages younger deaf people to set up businesses and stuff.
- Bobby: In this project, let's talk about bringing the hearing and deaf communities together what could we learn from each other?
- Ishtiaq: So, our aim is, as you said, is to bring the communities together. For years it has been segregated and separate but BSL, the grammar in BSL it's got their own grammar and that's why in spoken English it's got its own language. So, it's really hard to merge the two, so that's where VV comes in to play cos there is no

grammar, no linguistics in VV it's just expression through movement. And hearing people can watch that and understand, and also deaf people can watch it and understand. So that's how they can get the right body movements and the right gestures. Like for example when I went to Pakistan, and I met a lot of deaf people, but I also met a lot of hearing people as well. And but what I noticed was that in Pakistan hearing people were really good with gestures, like doing stuff like this. That movement means tea, do you want a cup of tea? Like they're really good with gestures that make me understand, really smiley and they show you what they mean. And that's what we need in this country. But stuff like this would make me understand what they want and how I can be there, it's just naturally there so I think we should bring that to British people. Hearing people in Britain they're quite straight-faced and it's just spoken, very formal, really difficult so I think the best thing would be to bring that into British culture is VV, is to show people how they can express themselves using movement. And to also interest people into it because VV is for everyone, it's not just for deaf people, it's for hearing people as well.

Bobby: Who pioneered VV? Where did it come from? You said it's ten years old.

Omar: Well really, it's quite a blur behind when did it sell, in the UK before I did it in the UK there wasn't anyone in the UK doing VV. Usually it was just British Sign Language and that's it. One organisation from England they went to Europe, and they did some filming there. And they saw a gentleman on stage doing VV, and they thought that was quite interesting and it was quite popular there too. And they saw it all around Europe. So, when they come back to England, they thought who could be skilled with VV and then they contacted me, they got in contact with me, and I didn't know what VV was at the time I didn't know what it was. So I went, had a sit down, had a chat with them and then I got a better picture of what VV was. Then I tried it, and they were like that's perfect, that's exactly it. And so, I thought, so I knew I had the skill inside me to do that. So, there's BSL on one side and then there's VV on the other side. And I didn't know but all my

whole life I've been using the two. But it's actually separate and so yeah that's what I've been doing for ten years.

Bobby: So where do you see the future of VV? Do you see it growing, do you see it surpassing BSL?

Omar: Really BSL that's more educational, it's the language, that will always stay but VV it's brilliant for hearing people, for example hearing people there always singing and speaking is separate isn't it. So singing is more entertainment. So, it might be relaxing to hear, or a bit of hip hop is quite upbeat. Or opera and different types of singing so like VV is something that hearing people can be involved with as well. So, we can even be watching a hearing person doing VV on stage as well.

Bobby: Are there many performances, you're putting a performance on in a week's time, but are there many performances in VV, are there other companies producing this work, in this country?

Omar: So yeah, there is quite a few different performers but they're not really clear on the whole visual vernacular part of it. So, there are deaf performers out there with VV included in their performance, but they don't just sit and mention that it's VV. So, there are a lot of deaf people who are really skilled at VV and it's growing as well. Myself I set up 10 years ago and I made it a clear separation between BSL and VV, I mention like I'm focused on VV. So yeah, it is out there.

Bobby: We are reaching the end of the discussion can we talk about inspiration. What things inspire you? Who are you inspired by? And that's a question for you Omar firstly.

Omar: So really, it's quite a long list but I'm going to pick a best one that I can think of. Before, as coronavirus was happening it really hit me and it also hit the other people in the community as well, but equipment has really helped us. Let's say 20 years ago when the equipment wasn't there how would deaf lives...how would we go about our daily lives. To communicate people would have to go far. Just to have a conversation. Now, luckily, we've got video calls, we've got face time, we've got stuff like that. Now it's really improved. It doesn't really feel like, it's not the same as meeting

someone in real life but it is a big step. But going out to me is 100-percent better. So, yeah when I heard the Offsite 9 announcement that inspired me to, through what I learnt through lockdown. They inspired me to set up my own project for the deaf and hearing people. And also, the Commonwealth Games coming up as well. I wanted to be involved with the VV. And so, I decided to apply for the funding, and I was successful so yeah when I asked Ish, I asked Ish if he would be interested, and he said, "Yeah brilliant, I will definitely be doing that," and now the time is coming, the performance is next week. I'm really shocked but really excited and also shocked that it's come.

Bobby: And what about you Ish, Ishtiaq what inspires you or who inspires you?

Ishtiaq: So, I'm on inspired by this one deaf man in Germany called Giuseppe, Giuseppe Guarana and he is amazing at VV, the way he tells a story with even his face, even his facial hair goes with his and his ponytail that goes with his act it's perfect. The way he moves is amazing. He blows my mind away, when I watch him, I'm flabbergasted. He is the best VV performer I have seen so far. When he came to England I was straight away went and met him because he inspired me a lot. And I thought you know I went to set up a VV as well and he encouraged me as well to pursue it. To think positive and to think about the future and about the next generation and to keep VV within the community. He doesn't want it to go away. So yeah, he really inspired me.

Bobby: Out of curiosity and my ignorance which language did Ishtiaq and Giuseppe speak in.

Ishtiaq: So yeah, we spoke with International Sign Language. It's not BSL and it's not his language as well, it was like we kind of met in the middle to do International Sign Language. But there is also some traits of VV in International Sign Language as well so, we we, communication wasn't a problem. We got along perfectly great.

Bobby: Great. Is there anything else Ishtiaq or Omar wants to say?

Ishtiaq: I'm really looking forward to March 12th, I want to inspire everyone watching.

Omar: And also, what Ish said I'm really looking forward to the show as well and I'm looking forward to also more VV shows in the future as well, to get more awareness. To get all the UK to know Ish is really good at VV. To know what VV is as well and recently I've had VV workshops recently and they were really popular. All of them were getting fully booked, for weeks, so I had to put a break on that. Because March 12th I have got a performance coming up and so I had to put a hold on that. But once that performance is done, I will be back on the workshops because they were really popular.

Bobby: Great. Thank you both so much and all the best for next week. Wishing you all the best for your show at the Newhampton Arts Centre.

Omar/

Ishtiaq: Brilliant. Thank you very much.

Bobby: Thank you. Thank you, Ishtiaq Hussain and Omar Haq.

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