

# The Shoe Project - a new life,

by Nadya Bondoreff



**On a Thursday night,** just before 6:00 p.m., twelve women sit *together* for their first day of a writing workshop in Toronto, Ontario.

Tea and cookies sit on a sidetable. As the women wait for class to begin, they make small talk with each other, uncertain of what to expect for the next eight weeks. The women are of all ages and origins, from Panama to Croatia to Eritrea to Japan. They are journalists. Mothers. Students. Business owners. Refugees. All Canadian newcomers. They are here to learn how to become better English writers. Except this is no ESL classroom: it is the basement of the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, a unique museum dedicated to the history of footwear, from ancient Chinese slippers to modern-day Uggs. This writing workshop would come to be called The Shoe Project.

“Immigration is a traumatic experience but living in Canada is like living in many cultures at the same time...and we all live peacefully together.”

Filiz Dogan was there for that first workshop in the basement in the autumn of 2011. Filiz was a successful psychotherapist in Istanbul, Turkey when she and her husband permanently immigrated to Toronto in 2002.

“Immigration is a traumatic experience,” Filiz remarks. “But living in Canada is like living in many cultures at the same time. I have people in my neighbourhood from Italy, Holland, Greece, Lebanon, and we all live peacefully together. We need to focus on the benefit of immigration, not the negativity.”



Through the advice of one of her former ESL teachers, Filiz agreed to participate in The Shoe Project, meeting with other immigrant women every Thursday night at the Bata Shoe Museum for eight weeks. Shoes were their common ground and became the key to expression, emotion, storytelling, and improving language skills on all levels. This opportunity to acquire skills, discuss their lives, and share ideas came with one condition as outlined by their facilitator, Katherine Govier: each woman had to write one 800-word essay related to shoes by the end of the session.

# one step at a time

Katherine Govier was not only the guide and facilitator of the workshops, she was the driving force behind the creation of The Shoe Project itself. Katherine, who lives in Ontario, is an award-winning novelist, scriptwriter, essayist, lecturer, black-belt martial artist, Tai Chi practitioner and someone who had always wanted to “work with immigrant women” and give them an opportunity to build their confidence and English communication skills.

At a dinner party in 2011, Katherine met Elizabeth Semmelhack, the curator of the Bata Shoe Museum, and discussed her plan to create a writing group for women. “Elizabeth always wanted an exhibition about shoes and immigrants,” says Katherine, explaining the link between her writing class and shoes. Semmelhack generously offered some space in the museum for a workshop; a private sponsor helped with the funding; and the writing workshop became a reality.



Katherine Govier

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It was not called The Shoe Project at first - this happened when Katherine and Elizabeth realized that shoes would be the perfect focus for the women's essays, and proved that “any shoe is interesting...the most banal object can be linked to our histories.”

When asked how The Shoe Project impacted her life, Filiz immediately replies, “It improved my self-confidence.” Filiz notes that her English also improved dramatically during her first Shoe Project session: “I learned a whole different way to speak, to listen, to write, everything. When I came to The Shoe Project I thought I was a very bad writer, but it was interesting to discover that I enjoy writing in English.”

The Shoe Project developed into a four-week exhibition at the Bata Shoe Museum in February 2012, with the women's real-life shoes accompanying each story. This eventually evolved into live performances at Toronto's Arts and Letters Club under the name “Standing Room Only”, with the women reading their shoe essays for large audiences. Katherine refers to the event as “the leap from page to performance” and Filiz says she never could have imagined standing on stage, performing in English, “in front of one hundred strangers!”



Like many newcomers to Canada, Filiz was also aware of her accent and mistakes. However, she learned that, as an immigrant, “Communication is so important. I need to express myself. We need to stand up for ourselves. We are holding ourselves back.”



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: We would love to hear what  
: you think about The Shoe Project!  
: What other “banal objects” could  
: be “common ground” for a diverse  
: group of people to talk about  
: and share experiences? Tell us at  
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: your story at [www.heremagazine.ca](http://www.heremagazine.ca)  
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