

FOCUS:

The Role of Theatre in the Global Refugee Crisis

Refugees are men, women and children fleeing war, persecution and political upheaval who have crossed borders to seek safety in another country. Most eventually go home when it's safe, some stay in temporary refugee settlements, and a tiny fraction resettle in a third country, such as the U.S.

The civil war in Syria has been one of the largest drivers of the global refugee crisis, which has left 65 million people displaced. With neighboring countries no longer able to absorb uprooted Syrians after more than seven years of fighting, more than a million refugees have fled to Europe to seek safety and better lives. At the same time, the U.S. is slamming its doors on refugees.

Through a partnership with NYC-based organizations that bring the arts into the lives of Syrian refugees, we'll follow the teaching artists who run the programs and the refugees who participate. Eventually, we can expand the scope to refugees in other regions and across the globe.



ASTEP



FORMAT:

A three-episode "chapter" of the docu-series will track three organizations of varying sizes, methods, and initiatives through the duration of one full program — i.e., the Refugee Youth Summer Academy over the course of an entire summer, or Bond Street Theatre through the creation and implementation of a curated arts program for a community in need.

Each episode will focus on a different refugee from before they are introduced to the arts programs, to their introduction to these programs and the start of their participation, to how the programs have changed and/or enhanced their lives.

WHY:

To educate the public about refugees; to dispel ignorance-based fear; to illuminate the similarities between the current refugee crisis and dictator-driven genocides throughout history.

After the Holocaust, we said "Never Again."



***"Now I can talk in front of people
and act in front of people
and have the courage
to stand before them."***

~ Hasina, Afghanistan



ASTEP

www.astepp.org

www.astepp.org/astepp-at-refugee-youth-summer-academy



Since 2010, **ASTEP** has led the creative arts component of the **Refugee Youth Summer Academy (RYSA)** in partnership with the **International Rescue Committee**, which supports the personal growth, cultural adjustment, and education of refugee youth and helps them successfully transition into the NYC school system.

ASTEP was conceived by Broadway Musical Director **Mary-Mitchell Campbell** and Juilliard students to transform the lives of youth using the most powerful tool they had: their art. Today, ASTEP connects performing and visual artists with underserved youth in the U.S. and around the world to **awaken their imaginations, foster critical thinking, and help them break the cycle of poverty.**

Access to the arts is essential to a child's success; it gives them **vital skills** that can be used in school and in their personal lives. They become **better communicators**, build their **confidence to participate**, and learn how to **solve problems by thinking outside the box.**

Most importantly, the arts show each child that **their voice is important.**
*There is **infinite possibility** in that belief.*

Through a team of 16-18 Volunteer Artists, ASTEP designs, implements and oversees RYSA's creative arts classes, which focus on **visual art, dance, music, and storytelling for 100-130 refugee youth** aged 5-25 years old.

RYSA is a six-week summer camp in July – August, and culminates in a graduation ceremony and performance for students' families and their community.

Our arts education classes allow refugee youth to break down the barriers they face by improving abilities they require to create a new life for themselves in their new home:

- English language skills
- Academic abilities
- Social and emotional skills
- Community ties
- Capacity for self-expression



In addition, our volunteers serve as trusted adult role models, mentors, and educators who **guide refugee youth in making healthy decisions about their futures.**



**BOND STREET
THEATRE**

www.bondst.org

“Once, while working in a refugee camp outside Kosovo, a doctor confided to us, “We are providing refugees the necessities for human survival – food, medicine, shelter – but you are providing them with food for the soul – you are restoring their humanity.””

Bond Street Theatre’s mission is to promote peace and mutual understanding through the arts.

Founded in 1976, Bond Street Theatre initiates creative programming that inspires and educates youth, addresses human rights issues, provides tools for healing communities affected by conflict, and promotes the value of the arts in shaping a peaceful future.

The company responds to humanitarian crises through the uplifting powers of the arts, initiating innovative theatre and theatre-based programs in over 40 countries worldwide, and reached populations in refugee camps, schools, shelters, prisons, rural villages and urban centers.

Bond Street Theatre creates performances that illustrate important social issues, and uses the arts to educate, inspire, and heal in areas of conflict, poverty and post-war rehabilitation.

The company is on a continual search for what is universal, what is common in human expression everywhere, what is it to be human.

Our goal is to further cross-cultural understanding by initiating theatre projects that promote peace, and to stimulate other artists towards these ends through international collaborations and training.



“My face hurt from laughing so much, because we never laugh!”

– Peshawar, Afghan refugee, Pakistan



Peacebuilding, empowerment and healing

The Refuge of the Stage

What roles can theatre play in the global refugee crisis? Healing, representation—and diversion.

BY SIMI HORWITZ

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Theatre with, for, and on behalf of refugees, migrants, and exiles—however those terms are defined—seems to be springing up more these days, in the midst of a metastasizing global refugee crisis. But it's nothing new: Theatres and artists have been grappling with these issues for decades, even millennia (think of Aeschylus's *The Suppliant Women*, for one).

There are new wrinkles in this broadly defined genre, though. As artists travel to global hot spots and set up shop, usually with the help of local social-service agencies and homegrown theatres that function as partners, the agitprop street theatre and public spectacle that predominated in the 1970s has largely given way to lower-key forms of drama, often incorporating local actors and non-professionals, designed to disseminate information and serve as a vehicle for psychological healing.

Consider the New York City-based [Bond Street Theatre](#), a major player on the scene for more than 40 years, advocating for social justice and peaceful coexistence in such conflict zones as Israel, Palestine, Brazil, Kosovo, and Myanmar (formerly Burma). The theatre's work is now centered in a squatters' village on the fringes of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, a refugee hub with hundreds of thousands fleeing from Somalia, Pakistan, Yemen, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iran, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar.

Indeed, it was the plight of Myanmar's Rohingya Muslims that brought Bond Street to Myanmar nine years ago, and it's that people's mass exodus from the country that has led to the theatre's most recent Malaysian project. Joanna Sherman, Bond Street's artistic director, said she has rarely seen people as downtrodden as the Rohingya, who were already impoverished, uneducated legal non-persons in Myanmar even before the recent ethnic cleansing began. They endured unspeakably perilous journeys to the refugee site: trekking through forests at night, crossing rivers in small boats, and hiding in the backs of pickup trucks, all thanks to the "largesse" of unscrupulous traffickers who could (and frequently did) commit virtually any atrocity at any point, e.g., unceremoniously dropping them off in the middle of nowhere and/or selling the women into prostitution.

To make matters worse, once they arrive at Kuala Lumpur, like many other asylum seekers there, they are not recognized as "refugees," a clearly defined legal status that would give them certain rights. For byzantine reasons that Sherman doesn't fully understand, Malaysia is not a signatory of the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, which leaves much of the country's refugee population extremely vulnerable to exploitation. The bottom line is that without official "refugee" designation, migrants are not allowed to work, and if they're caught they can be held in detention centers, deported at their own expense, or simply dropped at the border.

Sherman and her team quickly found a niche for themselves working alongside [Asylum Access Malaysia](#), a legal-aid organization that helps refugees navigate some of the complex legal processes they may encounter. They saw that Asylum Access, though well intentioned, was disseminating information in PowerPoint presentations to refugees who spoke a host of languages, some of whom (most notably the Rohingya) couldn't read or write at all.

"We came along and said, we can create sketches without language that will speak to everyone and illustrate what you're saying—what to do, for example, if the police stop you—and we can make the skits funny," she said. "The women from Somalia loved it. For the first time they understood what it was all about, and they hugged us. Same



Members of the new Rohingya Women's Theatre perform a scene about worker abuse for Rohingya refugees as part of their show titled "Know Your Options." (Photo by Joanna Sherman)

with the Rohingya. In fact, the Rohingya women enjoyed it so much, they wanted to learn theatre; they wanted us to teach them how to do theatre.”

With the help of translators, Bond Street—three full-time staffers and eight trainers—encouraged the women to create short problem-solution scenes based on issues of special concern to them. Many, for example, worried about what to do when police harass them for bribes. But the women’s enthusiasm could not compensate for their lack of theatre savvy. They had never performed before; indeed, they had never even been to a theatre. Teaching them the basics—from facing the audience to vocal projection to body language—was the first order of business, Sherman recalled.

The local [Masakini Theatre Company](#) got into the act, opening up its studio to the women to aid in the training. Ultimately the women, whose talents blossomed, performed their self-created scenes in a festival dealing with violence against women. They also presented their work in community centers that included talkbacks following a performance, where audience members (also refugees) offered their feedback on the problems and solutions that were dramatized. The team learned about community concerns and were able to contact those who could help. Equally important, the women felt they had a voice—something of value to say that someone else wants to hear.

Theatre plays yet another role. “What a lot of people don’t understand is how prevalent boredom is in refugee centers,” said Sherman. “Refugees are depressed, lethargic, and see no reason to get up in the morning. Creating theatre has changed that for them. It’s healing.”

Healing would also describe the work of Okello Kelo Sam’s Hope North, a boarding school in Uganda, which serves a refugee population of former child soldiers, orphans, and other young survivors of Uganda’s brutal civil war. At its height, the conflict saw thousands of child soldiers abducted and brainwashed by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) into committing blood-curdling atrocities against everyone, including their own families. Even those who aren’t literally orphans might as well be: Their families and communities view them as traitors and want nothing to do with them.

Okello Kelo Sam, theatre artist and former child soldier, managed to escape and founded Hope North in 1998 as an accredited secondary school and college prep to provide an education and future for youngsters like himself, devastated in the wake of LRA’s destruction. Hundreds of former Hope North students are now working toward their degrees and planning their careers.

Where does theatre come in? Sam said he uses it in his educational program as a therapeutic tool, offering victims—ideally transformed into survivors—the opportunity to express their feelings through performance.

“In that way, they are able to deal with those life-threatening situations that challenged them,” Sam said. “These reenactments give the kids a chance to explore and discuss what happened to them, make them realize that if they committed atrocities on the one hand or were raped on the other, it was not their fault.” He adds that there are virtually no trained psychotherapists in Uganda and that he himself was healed through such role-playing.

These mini-dramas may serve yet another purpose when performed in the communities from which these kids came: They can help open the door for dispossessed youngsters to be reunified and reconciled with their villages and families, Sam explained. If nothing else, the idea that these children are victims too is introduced.

Finally, these communal performances also become planned opportunities—destination points—for medical personnel to come and serve the needs of both performers and audiences.

Sam, whose work has received the support of such notables as Susan Sarandon and Mary Louise Parker, also credits [Silent Voices Uganda](#) and Forest Whitaker’s [Peace & Development Initiative](#) in Uganda as important organizations employing theatre as a healing tool.

Another striking initiative merging psychodrama and political theatre was an acclaimed adaptation of *The Trojan Women*, starring an all-female cast of Syrian refugees recounting their stories of loss and flight during a five-year war that has left more than 500,000 people dead and millions homeless, creating the biggest refugee crisis since World War II.

Syrian director Omar Abusaada launched the project in 2013 as a series of workshops that brought together 60 Syrian women based in Jordan. As they discussed and improvised scenes about their experiences, they chose characters in the play with whom they most identified, and Abusaada fashioned a work that meshed the original text with the stories of the refugees.

Even as many of the actors faced criticism from their families—performing is not viewed as properly modest—the creative process gave most of them a renewed sense of place and purpose. Several women wanted to speak out



"Syria: The Trojan Women," featuring a cast of female Syrian refugees, directed by Omar Abusaada. (Photo by Lynn Alleva Lilley)

openly against the Assad government, while others were fearful of the repercussions and preferred a more veiled interpretation.

Later, with the backing of the U.K.'s [Developing Artists](#), a charity that supports the arts in countries in conflict, and Refuge Productions, the show toured to the U.K. in 2016, and later to other parts of Europe; they also screened a documentary about the project at Columbia and Georgetown universities, followed by Q&As held via live video feed.

Though none of the women has since turned professional, a number of them have appeared in other theatrical workshops, and Abusaada said he wouldn't be surprised if one or two decide to try their hands on the stage in the future. And he believes they've all changed, not least in their comfort level with their bodies.

"They were scared of the theatre because it's about showing yourself onstage," he said. "In the end, they enjoyed it."

As the Syrian refugee crisis spills into Western Europe, some of its theatres have risen to the occasion, from doing outreach at refugee sites to incorporating the refugees' narrative into their repertoire. In Germany, an open-door policy has led to an especially large influx of refugees and migrants—most notably Turks, Kurds, and Syrians—and a number of theatres in Germany are attempting to grapple with this complicated new reality, which has led to unrest both among immigrant communities and among a newly reenergized nationalist Right.

At the forefront has been the [Maxim Gorki Theater](#) in Berlin, headed by Shermin Langhoff, who emigrated from Turkey as a child and said, "I became a Muslim because everyone said I was a Muslim."

Among Langhoff's initiatives: making sure that close to 50 percent of the theatre's core actors reflect ethnic, racial, and religious diversity. She recasts and readapts the classics, with Othello played by a Turk and a German-Turkish actor playing Lopakhin in *The Cherry Orchard*. She has also reshaped the repertoire, adding English supertitles (for foreign-language plays) and bringing on board a Berlin-based Israeli director, Yael Ronen, to helm—indeed, to forge—*The Situation*, a play about the conflicts among the mixed racial and ethnic groups in Ronen's own Berlin neighborhood. "How often do you see an Israeli director working with Palestinians and Syrians?" Langhoff asked rhetorically.

Ronen's play, based on improvisation, depicts what happens when foreigners of all stripes converge in a German language class. At once comic and serious, *The Situation* did well, and Langhoff was more convinced than ever that the theatre needed to do much more on behalf of foreign-born actors, audiences, and especially native German audiences who needed to be introduced to the new normal.



The Exile Ensemble in "Winterreise." (Photo by Ute Langkafel Maifoto)

needed to be introduced to the new normal.

In response to a casting notice for foreign-born actors, four additional “refugee” actors joined the fold, and Langhoff pulled together a new company, dubbed the [Exile Ensemble](#). Under Ronen’s direction, the creative team and cast traveled to 10 cities throughout Germany and met with historians, cultural pundits, and local theatre artists. Again, through improvisation, this time based on what the actors had heard, seen and felt, on their tour, they created *Winterreise*, which became a critically acclaimed piece in the same cities the troupe had visited. The company offered post-performance Q&As, as well as workshops that were especially successful in schools, Langhoff said.

While some migrant populations were in the audience, Langhoff stressed that her approach is not targeted in this way. “My approach is not to bring in migrants, but rather to create a compassionate program that evokes curiosity,” she said. “The program makes for the audience.”

Ayham Majid Agha, a Syrian-born actor-director who now heads the Exile Ensemble, agreed that good theatre has to be the goal. He doesn’t want to be categorized as a migrant, exile, immigrant, or refugee, and he doesn’t much care for “political” theatre, as he feels it frequently reduces Syrians (or Turks or Afghans) to binary stereotypes that simply confirm the public’s preconceptions: that migrants are either terrorists or impoverished, uneducated lost souls. In fact, he said, most are educated and have jobs. Portraying a fuller picture relies on the full input of those being depicted.

“Often theatre artists ask you about your life and then write a text without you, and it has nothing to do with your life,” he said. “They don’t believe you’re an artist or know anything about theatre. They ask if Syria has theatres; then they ask if you’ve ever been in jail and whether you arrived in Germany on a plane or boat. Then they ask, ‘What can we do for Syrian refugees?’ I’d much prefer we talked about artists and art.”

Christopher Hibma, producing director of the [Sundance Institute Theatre Program](#), which has a special interest in artists in and from the Middle East and North Africa, agreed that many exiles don’t want to talk about genocide, or indeed politics at all—that in fact these subjects are imposed on them by well-meaning but patronizing Western theatre folk. “I’ve heard exiles say they are whoring themselves, dramatizing stories they don’t want to tell, in order to get funding and be seen onstage at all,” noted Hibma.

Said Michael Balfour, professor of applied theatre at Griffith University, in Australia, “Theatre companies need to be wary of the humanitarian complex, in which short-term feel-good workshops are claimed as changing lives. It’s very important that the evangelical zeal is questioned. The rush to make an intervention is strong; but genuine, authentic projects are the result of long-term, consistent work that truly investigates, listens, and responds to the needs of participants. I also think the more interesting refugee performance projects draw on specific traditional forms of theatre as well as exploring hybrid modes.”

Among those I interviewed, most are optimistic about the way theatre by, for, and about refugees is evolving in Europe and the States.



A workshop of Kaimera Productions’ “Living Altar” at LaGuardia Performing Arts Center featuring the New York City-based collective Psychopomp. (Photo by Jonathan Camuzeaux)

Devika Ranjan, a graduate student at the University of Cambridge whose area of expertise is the ethnographic and oral stories of refugees and migrants, anticipates that theatres will become increasingly receptive to presenting the works of non-professionals who want to tell their stories in their own way. Ranjan, who will receive a second graduate degree in devised theatre, is part of the first cohort of fellows from Georgetown's [Laboratory for Global Performance & Politics](#).

The [League of Professional Theatre Women](#), a nonprofit advocacy organization of women in U.S. theatre, is now inviting distaff refugees from around the world to share their personal writings or videos for inclusion in their 2018 presentation *Writings of Women Refugees*. Under the title "My Life as a Refugee," these testimonies will be incorporated into a performance presentation that will take place in New York on World Refugee Day, June 20.

And then there's Simón Adinia Hanukai, educator, theatremaker, and co-artistic of [Kaimera Productions](#), who's in the process of creating three projects for and with refugees. Now based in Paris, Hanukai—who with his family came to the States as a young refugee from Azerbaijan—said he was almost instinctually drawn to socially engaged, experimental theatre that addressed the concerns of marginalized people.

In collaboration with the U.K.'s [Good Chance Theatre](#), which has set up shop in a holding center in Paris, the creative team erected a tent on the site to serve as a performance space for refugee residents from Syria, Afghanistan, and North Africa, 90 percent of them single men. The space was used for play and storytelling. "Without stories you are not human, and without a place to tell them you don't have a home," Hanukai said.

His second project, *SPACES*, is a storyteller's theatre exploring the concept of "home" for natives and newcomers. In Paris, for example, local residents will talk about what it means to be a Parisian by heritage or a Parisian with roots in Libya. The highly ritualized piece, bookended by and interspersed with dance pieces and other multimedia elements, will employ dancers as guides leading 10- to 20-member audiences through a space to hear a series of brief stories, at least half of which represent narratives voiced by non-native Parisians.

"I will work with each local storyteller," Hanukai explained. "The moment I see them getting too polished I will stop it. We're supposed to be connecting to the real person. What most audiences know about refugees is what they've seen on television, not face to face."

Hanukai's third project with Kaimera Productions, *Living Altar*, was workshopped at LaGuardia Performing Arts Center in Queens in May 2017. The final production will present a series of pieces—a story of recollection, a dance, a musical composition, or all of the above—that express local artists' responses to someone who was killed in global conflict. Clearly refugees will head the list, and artists will be free to focus their work as they see fit. Some may create a Living Altar as an homage to a person they knew, while others may honor a stranger whose life or experience resonates with the artist. The creative team will work closely with each artist or collective to support and guide them through the process.

Housed in a storefront, not unlike a gallery, *Living Altar* will run on a 12-hour loop, with art pieces in various parts of the space, through which audiences can wander and witness as they wish. There will also be live-streamed performances from various spots around the globe, leading one to speculate about the possibilities for virtual interactivity among artists in far-flung locations.

All the world's a stage? Maybe. As the Exile Ensemble's Ayham Majid Agha put it, "My dream is to see a new theatre, a united continent of theatre—no refugees, no asylums, no borders."