

Becoming political: asylum seeker activism through community theatre

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Abstract

In this paper, I reflect upon a community theatre project, *Journey of Asylum – Waiting*, performed in Melbourne in 2010 by nineteen asylum seekers. I interpret the project as a political intervention into administrative and humanitarian practices that engage asylum seekers as either disingenuous or damaged people. According to either formulation, asylum seekers lack the legitimacy to speak for themselves and therefore to engage in political contestation over the borders and citizenship norms they confront. By producing counter-narratives of refugee experience in *Journey of Asylum – Waiting*, asylum seekers participated in a broader process of political subject-formation. Through this process, I contend, asylum seekers position themselves as makers and shapers of the common civic sphere through which we shape political relations and obligations to each other. They become, in effect, new kinds of activist-citizens and reinvigorate the practice of citizenship.

Over the course of a week in March 2010, nineteen asylum seekers at various stages of application for refugee status in Australia and ten collaborating actors staged the theatre performance *Journey of Asylum – Waiting* at the Melbourne Trades Hall Bella Union Theatre. The performances were the culmination of a community development project of the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), a non-profit community organisation that provides legal, psychological and material services to asylum seekers in Melbourne. The project began a year earlier in a series of story telling and drama workshops, under the direction of Catherine Simmons, a community theatre professional, inspired by Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*.¹ Asylum seekers with little or no experience of acting workshoped the stages of seeking asylum as well as the emotions and questions – both personal and political – attached to these experiences. Simmons used verbatim theatre techniques to weave together a script from recorded interviews with asylum

seekers and from group improvisations. The script was performed as a work-in-progress in August 2009 and was crafted collectively over several months into the final production.

Theatre by and for refugees, in the Australian context, has grown in volume over the last decade as an artistic, therapeutic and political response to the hardening of borders against asylum seekers and the brutal effects of the detention regime that many confront on arrival.² In this article, I concentrate less on the artistic and therapeutic elements of theatre and emphasise the specifically *political* dimension of *Journey of Asylum – Waiting*. My involvement with the project began shortly before the work-in-progress performance, when I asked to observe and document the workshops and rehearsals as part of a broader research project into activism by ‘unauthorised’ migrants. Here, I reflect upon the project as a political intervention into administrative and humanitarian practices that engage asylum seekers as either *disingenuous* or *damaged* people. According to either formulation, asylum seekers lack the legitimacy to speak for themselves and therefore to engage in political contestation over the borders and citizenship norms they confront. By producing counter-narratives of refugee experience in *Journey of Asylum – Waiting*, asylum seekers participated in a broader process of political subject-formation. Through this process, I contend, asylum seekers position themselves as makers and shapers of the common civic sphere through which we contest political relations and obligations to each other.

The characterisation of asylum seekers as autonomous agents raises the question of how it is possible to have a political voice from a position of insecure immigration status. How can one speak when legitimacy as a claimant of rights is not established *in advance* by an equal relation of citizenship, and when significant risks are attached to speaking out at all? Asylum seeker status is increasingly interpreted as a marker of illegitimacy – so much so that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) now prefers to use other terms to describe those fleeing persecution in order to avoid association with ‘illegal’ immigration.³ How can asylum seekers enter into the public realm, *as asylum seekers*, without further hardening the very administrative categories and popular sentiments that cast them as intruders and outsiders? If such a task is possible, it implies a profound political transformation, well beyond policy changes on border policing or decisions on asylum applications. It implies a challenge to prevailing parameters of citizenship and alienage insofar as it means recognising that aliens – in this case, asylum seekers – have a role to play in negotiating the terms through which citizenship is established. I suggest that *Journey of Asylum – Waiting* made steps towards transformation of this kind. The performance constitutes a public assertion of asylum seekers’ status as equal subjects of justice alongside citizens and as equally capable authors of the shape that justice should take.

Before turning to a more detailed discussion of *Journey of Asylum – Waiting*, I first position the performance within a broader context of displacement, border control and humanitarian intervention. I do so in order to illustrate the ways in which asylum seekers have become associated with the kinds of negative stereotyping that the theatre production challenges. I also position the theatre project alongside other examples of ‘unauthorised’ migrant activism that challenge the boundaries of contemporary political communities. In this way, what might first appear to be a locally contained production connects with an emerging global social movement for migrant rights and access to mobility.

‘Refugeeness’ or the depoliticisation of the refugee

What is it about displacement that detracts from one’s ability to speak for oneself? There are obvious material, cultural and linguistic challenges to being in a place that is not one’s own that militate against the potential for political activism. Yet those that are displaced are also subject to legal and administrative procedures that generate, on one hand, assumptions about ‘the displaced’ as non-political beings and, on the other, forms of status (or non-status) that disqualify them from any recognition at all. Hannah Arendt identified this process when she documented the fates of the European inter-war refugees.⁴ Because the Rights of Man were codified in *national* laws, those rendered stateless in the inter-war period lost with their citizenship the legal basis from which it was possible to actualise those rights that were grounded, in-principle, in their very humanity. Stateless refugees were not only driven physically from national homelands, but also from conditions whereby it was possible to claim human rights. Others have shown, more recently, how today’s ‘unauthorised arrivals’ are frequently detained in legally ambiguous jurisdictions (offshore and excised territories) where the national laws that obligate states to process claims for refugee protection are compromised or suspended.⁵ These legal and geographical obstacles to human rights recognition render many border-crossers ‘illegal’ by default. Until they reach territory that is unambiguously covered by the International Refugee Convention, as codified in national laws, there are limited legal avenues for asylum seekers to be recognised as anything other than ‘unauthorised’. Under these conditions, asylum seekers join the ranks of other irregular migrants whose presence is increasingly constructed as a criminal rather than administrative offence. Various jurisdictions, including Italy and the US state of Arizona, have introduced laws to this effect.⁶ As criminal aliens, these migrants face the risk of exposure should they draw public attention to themselves. They also lose the authority to speak as deserving claimants of justice. Illegality begins to inhere in the *essence* of the border-crosser, rather than the act of border-crossing. As an ‘illegal immigrant’, *the person* is cast as disingenuous, dangerous and deportable, warranting their removal from public space and from association with citizens.

If the ability to speak for oneself is constrained by the absence of effective legal status, then the processes through which legal status is awarded also play a part. Indeed, the very humanitarian procedures deployed in order to safeguard refugees can have the effect of reducing refugees to non-speaking subjects. Liisa Malkki argues that one effect of humanitarian interventions that respond to mass displacement is to deconceptualise refugees from their diverse histories and personal circumstances. As a consequence, refugees encounter bureaucratic systems that reduce them to 'pure victims' rather than 'specific persons' and assume, even require, *political passivity* as an indicator of genuine refugee status.⁷ Malkki identified this effect with regard to international organisations (the UNHCR and others) that administered Hutu refugees in Tanzania in the mid-1980s. She observed that staff of these organisations frequently distinguished degrees of 'refugeeness' based on whether Hutus demonstrated physical and behavioural traits that accorded with victim tropes. Relief work was carried out against the background of an 'ideal construct, the "real refugee" ... imagined as a particular kind of person: a victim whose judgement and reason had been compromised by his or her experiences'.⁸ Those encountered as 'real refugees' were also encountered as *necessarily* irrational or incoherent. As a consequence, Malkki contends that regardless of well-meaning intentions, universalising ideas about what it is *to be* a refugee 'can strip from ... [refugees] the authority to give credible narrative evidence or testimony about their own condition in politically and institutionally consequential forums'.⁹ By contrast, those who do not fit the stereotypes (for example, those who exhibit active political leanings) are engaged as suspect in terms of being refugees at all. In either case, claimants to refugee status become 'unreliable informants', dependent on the evidence of legal, development and area 'experts' to resolve status issues.¹⁰

Asylum seekers identify a similar process in regard to the refugee determination process they encounter in Australia. Protagonists in *Journey of Asylum – Waiting* spoke at length of telling their stories over and over to anonymous bureaucrats – from their first over-the-counter meeting with immigration officials to interrogatory-style appeals tribunals and federal court proceedings. The most intimate and painful memories of fear, persecution and death were recorded, summarised, questioned, challenged and reproduced in a suitable format for 'experts' to assess. Protagonists spoke of what they felt was the impossibility of conforming to a bureaucratic ideal of refugee status. One was either too scarred (self-inflicted?) or not scarred enough; too vocal in proceedings (aggressive, irrational) or not forthcoming enough (unhelpful, unco-operative); when dates could not be verified due to culturally incompatible systems of measuring time or simply due to failed memories, they were questioned as 'witnesses of truth'. Asylum seekers spoke of the debilitating effect of this constant confrontation with doubt and disbelief such that they became reluctant to tell their stories at all, reduced to simply *waiting* for status decisions beyond their control

(hence the name of the performance). A kind of limbo arises on a material level as the waiting goes on in the absence of sufficient money, housing and occupation (work rights are in many cases denied). It also occurs psychologically in terms of the experience of ongoing status uncertainty. Sima, a mother of two from Turkey – who continues to wait, on appeal, after eight years – reveals something of these effects:

You can't think of tomorrow. You are always feeling sad and upset. Even if you want to go to school you can't go because your mind is always so full of stress and you can't concentrate. You come home, you don't even feel like staying in the house, you feel very uptight ... If I go to visit my friend or a relative, I can only stay for one hour, and then the noise and the sounds disturb you and I just want to go home. And I walk into the house and say, 'Oh god I'm home' and then I say, 'This is not really my home, not yet', and when I remember the things then I feel sad.¹¹

Maia, one of the actors in *Journey of Asylum – Waiting*, who has intermittently received psychiatric treatment since her arrival in Australia, reveals how she feels both psychologically abused and politically silenced by the process:

Here, we [refugees] are nothing, you know? Like jail, but psychological jail. You can't [do] anything – you can't ask, you can't talk, you can't say 'this is my right, this is my life.

Interviewer: You feel like you're silenced?

Yes. And you tell them [immigration officials] – they don't understand you ... They make you crazy, make you mental, make you like animal. They want to go in your brain, stop your brain. For me, fourteen months ago they said, 'Yes, we'll give you permanent [visa]' – then nothing news. Not any news. Just waiting.¹²

The government policy and media frenzy that foregrounds this process also reproduces an ideal construct of the refugee that is strongly linked to passivity. Both media attention and official rhetoric surrounding boat arrivals, in particular, have mobilised the notion of the 'queue jumper' in order to distinguish worthy from unworthy cases. Asylum seekers arriving without prior authorisation are immediately characterised as selfish and suspect because they have sought to 'jump ahead' of UNHCR-acknowledged refugees waiting in offshore camps for official resettlement. Here, once again, in those offshore camps, is the image of the 'real refugees'. Part of their credibility attaches to the fact that they have *not* taken matters into their own hands, but wait – patiently and passively – to be offered a resettlement place. Perversely, the very act of *seeking* asylum – regardless of the urgency of doing so, and regardless of the years and decades one is likely to wait for resettlement arranged by the UNHCR¹³ – works to undermine the sense that it is possible to be a refugee at all. If 'refugeeness', as a discourse of legitimacy, could be mapped along a scale, then autonomous acts push one towards the opposite end of the spectrum. At its furthest extreme, this logic

applies to the conceptual and legal difficulty of accounting for displaced refugee communities that are actors in conflict. Violent acts are off the scale of 'refugeeness'. By international law, a refugee *cannot* resort to violence, even though the violence may be perpetrated as a consequence of protracted displacement and the absence of resettlement options. Refugee warriors lose their legal claim to protection in part because of their unwillingness to be passive. As Peter Nyers argues, 'they undermine the humanitarian discourse on refugees precisely because refugee warriors have attained – and are recognised as possessing – political subjectivities'.¹⁴

All of this plays into the public reception of political acts authored by asylum seekers. Some of the most prominent acts undertaken by asylum seekers in Australia's recent past have included riots, hunger strikes and acts of self-harm in detention centres. In January 2002, three months after the beginning of allied operations in Afghanistan, hunger strikers in South Australia's Woomera Immigration Detention Centre sought to draw attention to the government's suspension of processing on asylum claims made by Afghans. In what remains some of the most confronting images of the politics of asylum in Australia, 70 detainees sewed their lips together in protest. Despite the profoundly political dimension of this and other acts of self-harm, official commentary mobilised an altogether different interpretation. For Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock, self-harm was evidence of a cultural gulf that stood between asylum seekers and Australians – a gulf that effectively demonstrated their unsuitability to be taken seriously as legitimate political actors. Ruddock expressed this view as follows:

[T]here are some people who do not accept the umpire's decision [on refugee status determination], and believe that inappropriate behaviour will influence people like you and me, who have certain values, who have certain views about human rights, who do believe in the sanctity of life, and are concerned when people say, 'If you don't give me what I want, I'm going to cut my wrists' ... You say it's desperation; I say that in many parts of the world people believe that they get outcomes by behaving in this way. In part, it's cultural.¹⁵

Ruddock implies that acts of self-harm indicate a lack of respect for the 'sanctity of life' – the notion upon which human rights are based. On this basis, he suggests that asylum seekers are not operating from the same value-field that must form the basis of legitimate political negotiation. To act in this way, to *impassively* question the neutrality of 'the umpire's decision' is, in Ruddock's reading, to undermine the asylum seekers' political credibility and to reduce their methods to those of opportunists. His implicit assumption is that genuine claimants to human rights will submit to established administrative processes and will not challenge the legitimacy of those processes themselves.

Ruddock rejects the more sympathetic interpretation of the lip-sewing protest as an act of desperation. Yet this latter view also plays into humanitarian discourses that reproduce images of damaged, broken people, unable to rationally or effectively represent their predicaments and desires. This trope of 'the victim' can easily be mobilised to represent asylum seekers and refugees (even those who are 'genuine') as burdens on the community and less than capable people who will always require social assistance (welfare and healthcare) at taxpayer expense. From this perspective, refugees can never be equivalent to citizens as claimants of rights since they lack the potential for *productive* community membership.

Thus, the ways in which asylum seekers and refugees are constructed *as people and types* profoundly affects whether or not their political claims are seen to carry authority. What I am trying to get at here is the process of subject-formation that occurs alongside contestation over the immediate issues at stake (protection, visas, detention and so on). Subject-formation is the process through which one establishes who one *is*, or who one is said *to be*. Political subject formation is the process through which one's status is established in ways that confer legitimacy as a political claimant, regardless of the nature of the claim. Political subjecthood is what Ruddock insisted that asylum seekers lacked, or had jettisoned via their actions. When asylum seekers are increasingly referred to as criminal, bogus, damaged and broken, they struggle to establish themselves as political subjects in this way. Yet this kind of struggle is precisely what characterises emerging social movements that contest the very terms in which different kinds of migrants are constructed as political (or non-political) beings. A growing body of literature documents diverse examples of this struggle on macro and micro scales.¹⁶ In many countries of Europe, for example, the *Sans-Papiers* (literally those without papers) refuse the designation of 'illegal immigrant'. They publicise accounts of colonisation that have shaped their migration to former centres of empire and argue that European citizens are implicated in that process. Millions of undocumented migrants in the United States have also mobilised to demand pathways to citizenship. Undocumented people refuse to countenance their criminalisation when they also form a crucial part of the country's labour market (some 5 per cent of its workforce).¹⁷ Their case also relates to their integration into regional development strategies that increasingly rely on 'unauthorised' migrants' financial remittances.

In my analysis of activism by 'unauthorised' migrants, I draw especially on scholarship that interprets such activism as 'acts of citizenship'.¹⁸ From this perspective, citizenship is understood as a dynamic practice, rather than a legal institution. 'Unauthorised' migrants are understood as citizens-in-making not so much in the sense of seeking formal citizenship – though, in most cases, this remains a central ambition. Rather, their 'citizenship' arises on account of the process of political subject-formation in which they are engaged. By positioning themselves, through activism, as equal subjects of justice, they challenge and reconstitute citizenship to incorporate a range

of aliens who are legally and discursively excluded. They reinvigorate the practice of citizenship in ways that generate new geographies of civic engagement that respond to the contemporary realities of transnational labour markets, neo-colonialism and global social relations in general.

It is in this sense of becoming political subjects that I engage with the activist dimension of *Journey of Asylum – Waiting*. In the following section I focus on two elements of the project. The first relates to confidence-building and solidarity over the course of the workshops – a process that links strongly to therapeutic qualities but that also transformed how participants thought of themselves *politically*. What occurred, I contend, was a process of *becoming-able* to be political *as asylum seekers*, in ways that subverted both disingenuous and damaged tropes of the refugee. The second element might be described as *being-political* in the sense of generating messages for public reception. In this respect I focus less on direct advocacy messages (say, the call for permanent visas) and more on narratives that emerged from the performance about what it means *to be* an asylum seeker and a refugee. These narratives had the effect of countering ‘refugeeness’ and projected an image of asylum seekers as autonomous political agents.

Becoming able to be political

According to the director, discussions at the interview and early workshop stage included what asylum seekers wanted to convey to a public audience. An important part of that message was the fact that *we are human* – a message so shocking in its primacy as to starkly reveal how *dehumanising* the asylum procedure had been. Asylum seekers felt that before the Australian public their very humanity was in question. Another key part of the message was that being a refugee was not a matter of choice. No-one would choose to leave their homes and seek asylum unless there were no other options. In the face of competing images of ‘bogus’ asylum seekers there was clearly much that protagonists wanted to explain about their own and others’ journeys. However, countless efforts to justify those journeys to immigration officers, tribunals and judges had left many asylum seekers feeling that they were simply unable to express themselves and, moreover, that there was little point in doing so.

Asylum seekers’ participation in *Journey of Asylum – Waiting* was thus always spliced with ambivalence. The project offered an avenue for participants to raise in a public forum issues that they wanted to speak about. However, speaking meant overcoming a range of fears and anxieties that related to the debilitating effects of the asylum procedure in Australia, including the prospect of re-living past experiences of trauma. In some cases there were profound psychological obstacles to committing to a project that not only asked participants to speak to yet another audience, but also required consistent attendance at workshops and rehearsals and concentrated skills development. Ambivalence about participation also related to the perceived risks of going public. Some had fears that ‘story telling’ would not reflect

well within their expatriate communities in Australia in which members retained connections to the governments and agents who continued to threaten family members abroad. Others feared harsh judgement and ostracism from within their own communities on account of participating in mainstream Australian activities viewed as culturally or morally suspect. Still others were uncertain about the implications of public actions for asylum decisions in progress. Immigration lawyers had recommended that they maintain a low profile. Even after protagonists had agreed to join the project, these fears and doubts continued to raise questions about its benefits and sometimes limited the extent to which asylum seekers were willing and able to fully engage.

Something of a breakthrough occurred as the director gently exposed participants to the possibilities of theatre as a creative form of expression. Simmons prompted the group to find a rhythmic and symbolic language to render their stories public, a language that would not only speak to personal experience but would also convey a collective truth that could intervene in a broader politics of border control. For some protagonists, this artistic form gave them a way to express their message without necessarily having to reveal the specifics of their own experiences. This was simultaneously an artistic realisation and the result of a slow-built group dynamic. Over time, the workshops generated a safe-space for personal exposure—a space in which intimate stories were received with respect and compassion in a way that countered some of the effects of anonymous bureaucracy. Trust was gradually built such that stories could be shared and ‘acted out’ by others. On account of this process, a number of participants described a sense of being ‘unlocked’ and able to communicate more freely. Peter, for instance, contrasted his experience with the ‘closed’ feelings he had had while in detention:

[The project] gave me the opportunity to be able to tell my story, to express myself to people that are really willing to hear it ... And I would like to use this word ‘offloading’—the load that was on my chest ... Because I never really got a chance to fully express how I felt ... Not just the bad feelings, but also the good feelings. Because there were times when I had so much excitement but I couldn’t show it, and there were times when I had so much anger and pain but I couldn’t show it. But here I am able to express all those feelings, especially to be excited.¹⁹

For Gabriel, the project provided a sense of liberation:

At first I wasn’t very happy to tell everyone about my real story, about my real life. Then after a few weeks I thought, yeah, that’s my real life and I had to face that. And facing my real life in that way, it gave me a lot of confidence and made me feel a lot better about myself and feel very free. I can’t really explain that, but psychologically ... I felt a lot better about how I feel. Because that is something that I have kept inside myself for the last—long time ... fifteen fucking years exactly, and I’m glad that

I could express myself. And I've seen there are people struggling to tell their own story. But in the end I realised that everybody's achieving something out of this.²⁰

Other protagonists spoke of the importance of the friendships formed within the group in terms of overcoming obstacles to participation. They acknowledged that the group connection had given them the confidence and the desire to be part of a shared political project. Some spoke of how the bond within the group had helped them to overcome 'inferiority complexes'. This was important, Asif contended, because it gave asylum seekers the wherewithal to assert themselves politically without falling into familiar patterns of always playing 'the victim'.²¹

Each of these reflections reveals part of the work it took to *be able* to be political and to entertain the prospect of making stories public on asylum seekers' own terms. It took time and trust within the group to *be able* to believe that a message could emerge from the performance that was not a perverse version of intimate details, twisted by either government agents or well-meaning advocates. The performances themselves solidified this work by demonstrating to protagonists that speaking out was not only therapeutic but politically purposeful. For Jaaved, this realisation came as something of a shock:

When I was first ... hearing about this drama, I thought it would be not that much worthy, because nobody would come by and watch the show – like, why would the people come by and watch our sad stories and weep and go home and pay 40 dollars for that, you know? Why? People like to hear some stand up comedy, some fantasy, Shakespeare, things like that – happy! No, it's not a good idea. But when I think about it I was like OK – let's give it a try. And it was hard, yeah. But kind of finding it very much powerful and I thought, wow – people are interested in our stories, they want to hear these things, and it's good that they have the feelings to know other peoples around the world, and what's happening there.²²

Not only had audiences listened, but many contributed lengthy commentaries on the performance via guest-book entries and emails to the ASRC. Some of this feedback included accounts of audience members who had previously known little about asylum seeker issues but now felt compelled to engage politically in support of their rights. This feedback gave protagonists a sense that it was possible to change people's minds, 'to make history', as one actor put it, and to do so *on account* of being spokespersons for themselves. Some asylum seekers had, of course, been active politically in their countries of origin. Yet in Australia they confronted the depoliticising effects of 'refugeeness'. Through the project, it was possible to be both refugees *and* agents of political change. Upon reflection, a number of protagonists spoke of being ambassadors for asylum seekers in general, of scaling-up their ambitions to connect their own experiences to broader

patterns and trends, 'to express our feelings and our experiences as a voice of asylum seekers for the world, not only asylum seekers in Australia'.²³ As Ravi put it, after the performances:

Now we advocate – we achieved our goal. Because a lot of people they don't know about asylum seekers, they think always asylum seekers are like problem-maker, or they don't do anything, they don't know anything. But now, we changed a lot of people's minds. Now maybe they tell their family members ... I think ... if people unite or we are together – we can achieve anything. This is one of [the things] I learned [from] this project.²⁴

There was also a sense for the limitations of political outcomes. Protagonists acknowledged that the effects of their performance would not be direct but that it was nevertheless possible to effect social change in gradual but tangible ways. This realisation, in turn, led to a raft of future ambitions and plans to be political. Specifically, many protagonists were keen to transfer the skills and strategies they had learnt via the project to other asylum seekers – to act as both artistic and political mentors. Some wanted to produce more theatre to address a broader range of issues, including the difficulties many former asylum seekers faced *after* they received protection visas. As plans were discussed, fears sometimes re-surfaced. After both the work-in-progress and the final performances, some protagonists expressed a sense of embarrassment and over-exposure on account of having told their stories so openly. Some expressed uncertainty about whether they would have the courage to do it again. While a sense of ambivalence therefore remained, others were quick to contextualise those feelings in ways that had not seemed so obvious prior to involvement in the project. The group discussed not only their doubts, but also strategies to overcome them. Through a shared sense of purpose and a mutual experience of risk, this collective was able to plan for the work it would take to *be able* to be political.

Being political

It is always difficult to judge the political impact of theatre by and for refugees in terms of transmitting a direct advocacy message. Such theatre often draws the bulk of its audience from concerned community networks and therefore attracts the criticism that it merely preaches to the converted. *Journey of Asylum – Waiting* was no exception in this regard. While considerable efforts were made to invite a cross-section of state-government officials and prominent community members on the opening night, the performances were otherwise publicised through the networks of the ASRC. The performance may well have encouraged a largely sympathetic audience to persist in existing efforts in support of asylum seekers. My concern here, however, is not to assess or defend arguments of this kind. I am interested in a different kind of impact – namely, the extent to which *Journey of Asylum – Waiting* challenged 'refugeeness' as a discourse in which 'the converted' are just as implicated as those more hostile to asylum seekers' rights.

The first spoken act of the performance begins when an asylum seeker, John, is thrown out towards the audience by a chorus of actors who abandon him on stage. John prompts the audience to tell him why he should bother to tell them his story:

I'm sick of telling my story. Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. I already told my story – it doesn't work. I don't want to. Don't make me do this. Sorry, I don't want to play.

The scene immediately positions the performance in terms of the performers' ambivalence about being there at all. But it also establishes the terms in which stories are subsequently told. This is *not* an act of desperation. Nor is it a case of asylum seekers having stories dragged out of them (interrogation-style) in order to justify their cases. Equally, it is not a case of telling stories to social workers and caseworkers charged with 'expert' assessments. John does not *have* to 'play' but, as the performance continues, he wilfully chooses to do so.

As John exits, the lighting draws attention to Sunil, an attractive young Sri Lankan man, reclining seductively in a glass cage. A soundtrack plays an advertisement for a 'gold-class cinema experience'. Sunil taunts the audience, again, on the premise for telling them his story:

Give me a banana and I'll tell you a story.

Give me two bananas and I'll tell you MY story.

But maybe you won't sleep for the rest of your life.

When this scene was workshopped in rehearsals, there were mixed feelings about the message it conveyed. In its first formulation, Sunil acted literally like a monkey in a cage while onlookers engaged with him as if in a zoo. For a number of protagonists, the irony of the delivery was not enough to counter the offensiveness of the reference to being a monkey. The ensuing discussion reflected upon how the scene could more effectively address performing 'like a refugee'. In its final version, the scene plays with the notion of the refugee-as-spectacle. Scholars have drawn attention to the imagery of 'refugeeness' that plays to a voyeuristic humanitarian concern. In the glossy brochures of aid agencies, refugees often appear indistinguishable from each other as a spectacle – as a mass of (usually black) bodies, both exoticised and pitied at once.²⁵ Elsewhere the imagery of 'refugeeness' is commodified as a kind of 'refugee-chic'. Such imagery appeared, for example, as a theme in a high profile fashion show in Barcelona in 2008.²⁶ Community theatre is premised to some extent on generating face-to-face exchanges that challenge images that have come to stand in for the diversity of actual people. Yet even those exchanges can reinforce objectified perceptions of the person or subject in question. Salverson refers, for example, to an 'aesthetics of injury' in theatre that caters to a voyeuristic fascination with the details of pain and suffering and works to reproduce 'the injured' as one-dimensional victims.²⁷ In the scene outlined above, Sunil suggestively entices his audience to be fascinated by his story. When he

threatens the audience with sleeplessness he invokes an exoticised sense of danger and intrigue that plays deliberately into the aesthetics that Salverson describes. But Sunil's ironic delivery implies that voyeurism comes at a cost. The desire to continue watching implicates the audience in both Sunil's past and in the outcome of the present. Sunil challenges the audience both to *observe* him as victim (with all the discomfort this entails) and to take responsibility for his victimhood *as a product of the encounter* between audience/advocate and actor/refugee.

Sara Ahmed argues that strangers to any community – in this case asylum seekers and refugees – are constituted as types or 'figures' by the nature of the encounter between self and other.²⁸ When we encounter strangers in our midst, whether through abstract media reports or through concrete meetings, we become implicated in a process through which 'the figure' of the stranger appears as a necessary contrast to ourselves. That figure may be constituted in different ways – threatening and dangerous on one hand or, on the other, fetishised as overtly cultural and interesting in ways that 'we' are not. Either way, the stranger is 'fixed' by assumptions about their nature that obscure both diversity within the stranger-group and those assumptions through which certain groups become identifiable as strangers in the first place. Ahmed contends that fetishisation can only be avoided through face-to-face exchanges, where strangers can be encountered as living, dynamic and surprising beings. This is not to say that such exchanges are not also spliced with pre-conceived ideas about 'the figure' with which one is engaging. But without face-to-face exchanges, *only* 'the figure' appears.

A sympathetic audience who has not met asylum seekers face-to-face has only 'the figure' of the refugee to go on. This 'figure' comes into being through humanitarian discourses that establish 'refugeeness' in terms of exposure to human rights abuse. The 'figure' is reinforced by media reports showing predatory people smugglers, acts of self-harm and so on. For others, engaged with asylum seekers in humanitarian-driven community work, face-to-face exchanges take place in the context of a service-delivery model. Such work undoubtedly provides crucial support to clients who may otherwise face extreme material and psychological hardships, just as larger scale relief operations (of the kind critiqued by Malkki) provide essential aid in cases of mass displacement. In both cases, however, the premise of the service sets up the encounter as one between 'experts' on one hand, and damaged, needy people on the other. The encounter reproduces a specific expectation of how one relates to the other that is based on the non-equivalence of parties.

Journey of Asylum – Waiting gave rise to other kinds of encounters. In this respect, the audience extended to the broader community of ASRC volunteers and workers and all those involved in the process of the project. Removed from the context of service-delivery, asylum seekers were transformed into spokespersons for themselves and experts on their

own circumstances. They became subjects in excess of 'refugeeness'. On stage, asylum seekers were more than the sum total of grief, loss and victimhood. Here they were encountered as multi-dimensional beings – as asylum seekers and refugees but also as actors, interpreters, musicians and comedians, as specific persons with individual histories, personalities and talents. Competent and socially engaged, they expressed an artistically honed and autonomous political purpose.

If Sunil's scene directly challenges the notion of 'refugeeness', other scenes raise doubts about the very possibility of 'genuine' refugee status. In one scene the protagonists are lined up facing the audience, seated as if for a combined tribunal hearing. The tribunal member sits – god-like – in a tennis umpire's chair behind and above the audience and his booming voice interrogates one protagonist after the next. He prompts them to appear more 'genuine' ('You don't look Hazara'), to verify inconsistencies in their story ('In your first statement when you first applied for protection, there is no mention of any rape ... Who told you to say you were raped?'), to stop being 'unreasonable' ('There's no need for that tone, madam'), without giving time to allow for a full response. He challenges their credibility ('How do we know you didn't just hurt yourself?') and their moral values ('I would never want to judge you but what sort of a mother leaves her children behind?'). The protagonists' increasing agitation and aggression directed towards the tribunal member works to diminish their status and credibility in his eyes. The relentlessness of the questions (derived from protagonists' own experiences of refugee tribunals) quickly demonstrates the ridiculousness of the evidence and the behaviour required to demonstrate refugee status.

At its most literal level, this scene challenges the legitimacy of the administrative procedure through which authenticity as a refugee is established. However, the scene and the performance as a whole work in more subtle ways to problematise the very notion of authenticity. On one hand, in his opening scene, John reminds the audience that the performers are not just actors – but real 'live' refugees:

Look I'm not an actor, all right – it's my real life.

In the movies you get shot, you can stand up and do the scene again.

This is my life; this is not an act.

On the other hand, we are never really sure if the stories portrayed are those of the actor or details from someone else's life. The stories may be true – but the person who transmits them shifts between roles, from asylum seeker to actor and advocate. The difficulty of establishing authenticity in this context (both in terms of appealing to the tribunal member and in terms of the act/real-life distinction) magnifies awareness that *being* a refugee is a legal, administrative and discursive designation, rather than something essential. We are left with the failure of the refugee determination procedure to be the evidence-based process it claims to be. In the absence of neutral procedures,

we are confronted with what ultimately remains an *ethical* challenge – the *responsibility to decide* on the limits and hospitality of our own political community.

We cannot know with any certainty what the impact of *Journey of Asylum – Waiting* was or will be. What we can say, however, is that through the project and the performances asylum seekers transformed the nature of the encounter between themselves and others. This transformation occurred both at the level of collective empowerment (*becoming able* to be political) and as an intervention into public discourses and practices. Protagonists both resisted and renewed what it means *to be* refugees and asylum seekers. By doing so, they also implicitly challenged what it means to be a citizen, because citizenship is always crafted with respect to non-citizen outsiders. These shifts in meaning constitute new political subjects – new kinds of migrants and citizens who relate to each other as political equivalents. It is in this sense of subject-formation that *Journey of Asylum – Waiting* can be seen as an ‘act of citizenship’. It is also in this sense that the project relates to other ‘acts of citizenship’ by ‘unauthorised’ migrants elsewhere around the globe. By crafting new narratives of refugee experience and by extending an ethical challenge to audience members, asylum seekers are intimately and publicly engaged with the transformation of contemporary political communities.

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