STUDIES IN SOCIAL JUSTICE
Volume 16, Issue 2, 518-530, 2022

Dispatch

The Jungle: From Refugee Camp to Theatre Space

LORNA VASSILIADES
Queen Mary University of London, UK

Britain and Refugees: Where have we Arrived?

At dinner recently with British Polish friends, a professor of economics and a professor of history, I learned that the biggest relocation of refugees to the UK was after the Second World War when the British government granted citizenship to over 250,000 Poles. Fast forward to 2022, when it looks close to certain that the proposed Nationality and Borders Bill will become law. This piece of legislation ignores international law on the rights of asylum seekers and refugees. It's a response to the "invasion" of "illegal migrants" risking their lives to cross the Channel from France. How, we asked ourselves, did we get to this?

The same question was asked in the theatre towards the end of 2017, before Brexit, and when most English Channel crossings involved hiding in lorries. Today *The Jungle*, a play by Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson (2017) seems more relevant than ever. When it resumes production in Spring 2023 and begins a USA tour (as planned before COVID-19), it will be amidst an even more xenophobic and less humanitarian world.

On the surface, this multi-award-winning play is about migrants and refugees in the makeshift camp in Calais, France, between 2015-2016, which became known as the Jungle. The camp attracted huge media attention with headlines about migrants trying to make it illegally into the UK by crossing the Channel through any means. *The Jungle*, however, is much more than a play about refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. It offers a challenging insight into the effects of government policies and sensationalized media narratives on ordinary people who are forced to flee from their homes yet hope to create a new and safer life. The text exposes how governments break their own laws. Even though the original camp was demolished, crossings

Correspondence Address: Lorna Vassiliades, School of Languages, Linguistics & Film, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK, E1 4NS; email: l.vassiliades@qmul.ac.uk

ISSN: 1911-4788

continued while the hysteria around them was deliberately escalated, leading to the proposed Nationality and Borders Bill (n.d.).

This report on what the play and Good Chance Theatre, the charity behind it, have achieved, is based on my own phenomenological experiences of it, recorded in detailed notes.[1] I investigate the play from inception to production using Good Chance Theatre's online and educational material, media coverage and the text itself.[2] I also read through theatre, social history, and media scholarship, along with a range of refugee discourses in psychology, anthropology, and mental health literatures (e.g., Bartholomew, 2015; Bouhenia et al., 2017; Dhesi et al., 2018; Ibrahim & Howarth, 2016, 2018; Kandylis, 2019; Loizos, 2007; McGee & Pelham, 2018; UNHCR-UK, n.d.) My connection to the play comes from lived experience of forced displacement.

From the Jungle to *The Jungle* on Stage

During the multi-regional crises of 2015 leading to over a million people arriving in Europe, several small humanitarian organisations sprang up in Calais, which traditionally had attracted refugees seeking to reach the UK. Unlike other camps in Europe, there was no official refugee camp here supported by the United Nations, governments or NGOS. British citizens Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson's personal response to the news headlines of migrants crowding into squalid conditions in the hope of making it to the UK was to visit the Jungle to see for themselves. Their *artistic* response was humanitarian: they set up a theatre space *for* refugees, to provide community and solace. The charity Good Chance Theatre was set up with London's West End producer Sonia Friedman and award-winning director Stephen Daldry as trustees. The name comes from the term "good chance," which is what refugees hope for to cross the Channel. Through one of the most successful crowd-funding campaigns in UK history, the charity built a temporary Theatre of Hope in the Jungle, which took the form of a second hand 11 metre white, geodesic dome (see Figure 1). There were workshops every day from artists offering their services voluntarily. These multi-genre workshops led to creative work shared every week for seven months until the camp was

[1] The productions referred to are: *The Jungle,* by Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, directed by Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin, Playhouse Theatre, London**,** 6 July 2018, 3 November (evening performance) 2018; St. Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn, New York City, 27 January 2019. References to the play's production details with no specific date refer to consistent aspects. Specific date references refer to particulars of that performance. My analysis throughout will specify whether my points refer to the text or live production.

[2] All information about Good Chance Theatre, unless otherwise cited, is from the official website: https://www.goodchance.org.uk/

demolished in 2016. Each Saturday the theatre would schedule "Hope Show"' developed during the week for up to 250 people in the audience.

Figure 1. Building the dome (photo: Joe Robertson).[3]

Unlike many of the small organisations that wound down after the Jungle was demolished, Good Chance Theatre linked up with Help Refugees (also known as Choose Love) to continue its educational activities and fund raising. The charity continued its work erecting domes, running festivals and working with refugees after the Jungle's demolition. Murphy and Robertson also developed their experiences of the Jungle camp into a fictionalised play, *The Jungle*. It sold out at two theatres in London, garnering five-star reviews, and transferred successfully to New York City and San Francisco.

It may be difficult to measure the success of audience reactions in terms of theatre practice theories and activism; however, audience figures and impact

[3] All images were provided by Good Chance Theatre and are used with permission.

are a strong indication. In the UK and the USA, 130,000 people saw the play, gaining awareness of what it means to be displaced and to live in a temporary space. The production has informed audiences on the refugee crisis and forced migration through a combination of the play itself, activities, exhibitions, discussions, events attached to the play, social media, and accessible online information. It is impossible to separate the play from Good Chance Theatre and the charity's impact: 27,500 audience members, artists, volunteers, and participants in its theatre domes (including 680 artists and volunteers from over 20 countries), 58 Hope Shows with performers from all over the world. Help Refugees reported that over half their volunteers in Calais had travelled from the UK to volunteer having watched *The Jungle* in London.

The charity continued its campaigning throughout lockdowns and the pandemic crisis. In 2021, one of the play's characters, nine-year-old unaccompanied refugee Little Amal, became a 3.5 metre puppet that travelled 8,000 kilometers from Turkey to the UK in *The Walk*, a production in support of refugee children (see Figure 2). She also made an appearance at Cop26.

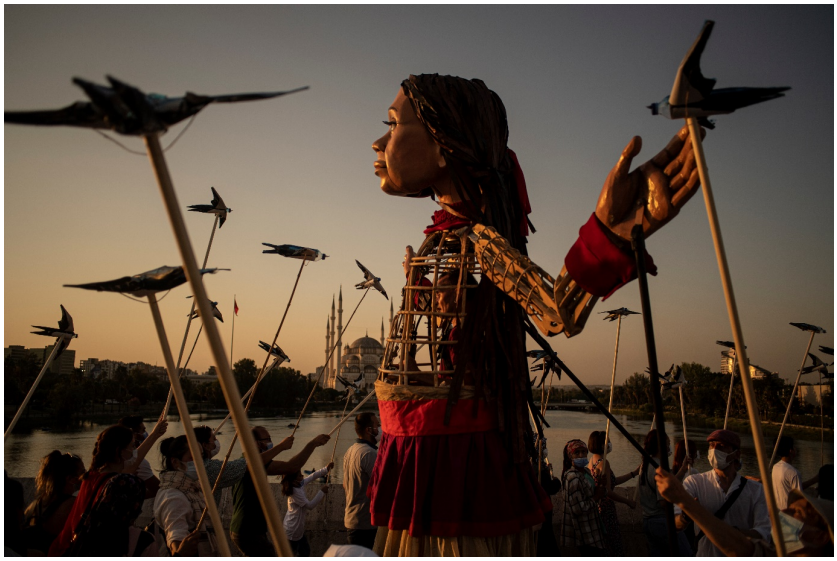

Figure 2. *The Walk* featuring the Little Amal puppet in Adana, Turkey (photo: Andre Lihon).

From My Refugee Roots to Academic Research, via a Play

Two months before I began my M.Sc. in Creative Arts and Mental Health in 2018, I was interviewed for a writers' residency. One of the questions posed to me was whether I would choose to produce *The Jungle* or small venue productions. The choice was described as a London West End play made by white writers and directors, or work written and made by refugees and asylum seekers. My first answer was that both are possible, and the question should not be either/or. My (male) interviewers insisted I choose one or the other option. I took a deep breath, sensing that I was saying goodbye to the residency by giving my honest answer. I began my sentence slowly. "As a refugee *myself*, *and* as an artist whose work has been rejected, and who has been told that I come from a minority that isn't of any huge marketing value, I would still choose the major West End production." I explained that I was born in London to Greek Cypriot parents and that we returned to their family town when I was a child, until the 1974 invasion when our town became occupied. I added that as a writer-performer who had self-produced a one woman show at a small theatre, I was acutely aware of the challenges of small venues. The two interviewers did not hide their disapproval of my answer. They had no interest in my perspective, even though it began with sharing their cynicism.

I had avoided *The Jungle* when it first appeared off West End at the Young Vic. The concept of transforming the auditorium into an Afghan café sounded like a gimmick, and I dismissed it as a production that was jumping on the bandwagon of publicity surrounding the Jungle. What could two young, non-refugee, male playwrights possibly tell me about being a refugee? A lot, as it turned out. By the time the play transferred to the West End's Playhouse Theatre I was swayed enough by the positive publicity surrounding the production to accept a theatre critic friend's invitation. I emerged from that balmy July press night knowing something major had shifted for me. I was a different person. The day after, I booked to see the play again. I was yet to know that a mission was shaping within me.

One of my most enduring memories of my first visit to the play was witnessing the woman sitting across the stage from me slowing dissolving into tears. I realised I was able to grieve alongside an audience that I experienced as interested in and compassionate towards the displaced, and that this was as important as watching the play itself. On my second visit, sitting next to me was a young man who had brought his mother. Across from me was a white woman with grey hair together with a younger man with dreadlocks. They symbolized to me the power of this play to attract a diverse audience in every sense. All these different people were *interested* in displacement and what that meant. The experience of seeing this in a play affected them.

As I left the auditorium that night, I passed a woman looking at the set with tears in her eyes. It was producer Sonia Freedman. As serendipity would have

it our eyes met, and I heard myself tell her this is the first play that has spoken to me, the first time I feel heard, and that's why I came a second time on the last night. She thanked me, then asked me where I was from. It was then natural to ask her how *The Jungle* happened. I knew of course that she was a trustee of the charity, but I wanted to know *why*. Her reply was that of a conscious human being committed to social justice: "I wanted to know what was happening. We [Murphy and Robertson] wanted to know what was happening."

At that stage I had no idea of the personal impact the play would have. I had been a journalist specializing in lifestyle, wellbeing, and psychology; and after writing three business psychology/self-development books for the *Psychologies Magazine* brand, I wanted to go deeper. I also wanted to explore my recent venture into solo performance, so the M.Sc. in Creative Arts and Mental Health at Queen Mary University of London was perfect for me. But at the point of applying, I never imagined I would be going back to my displaced roots, focusing my masters research on refugees and mental health, leading to my current PhD studies.

I experienced the play not only through the lens of a minority displaced person, but also as a citizen of a country that had adopted an anti-migrant and anti-refugee stance. As a UK-born British citizen I confronted my lack of knowledge of the British government's role in the Jungle. I did not know that my government, working with the French government, financed security of the Calais border, and that there was a blanket description of "migrants" by my government in an agreement with the French government. I also confronted my own biases: it had never occurred to me to consider the plight of lone displaced men.

I saw the play for a third time in New York City in January 2019. At Brooklyn's St. Ann's Warehouse, I spotted writer Joe Murphy in the interval and hovered in the hope of saying a few words to him once the animated man in front of me had finished; I caught a snippet about his family's refugee roots. When Murphy turned to me, I told him I am a refugee from Cyprus who was grateful that the play has brought so much understanding about what it means to be a refugee. He talked about people seeing the play and then tracing refugees in their family history.

I returned to my single seat between two couples. To my right were the Manhattan theatre lovers who came because of the rave reviews. To my left, rare theatregoers who came from Oregon having seen so much on Facebook about the play. Neither couple was disappointed. The most painful part of the play was yet to come, and for a third time I would cry. Back out in Brooklyn's Dumbo, with Manhattan Bridge all lit up, I felt a curious pride in being British. Here was a British play challenging how politics has treated a humanitarian crisis, sold out in Trump's anti-migrant USA where migrants were demonised. The production featured actors from different ethnicities, including a former asylum seeker and three actors who themselves had lived

in the Jungle. It had been a feat obtaining visas for some of the cast to reach Trump's USA.

The Paradigm of an Activist Play

The Jungle thrusts at the audience the question of whose responsibility it is to help the displaced resettle. The play's structure is cyclical, opening with a French court judgement on the demolition of the Calais refugee and migrant camp known as the Jungle. It then rewinds to how the camp was set up and named, and charts the arrival of British volunteers, individuals who want to help. As more and more people arrive, plans for creating housing are made and an English school is set up. The Jungle becomes a place with facilities and streets. On 13 November 2016 the media link the terrorist attack in Paris with an accidental fire that destroys part of the camp, even though the two events are unconnected. The volunteers help to rebuild the section damaged by the fire, but tensions continue to mount as they receive the decision that some of the camp is to be demolished. At this point the play resumes where it began, and the residents agree to relocate to the half of the Jungle that will not be demolished. There is a peaceful resistance to save a restaurant that runs across the divide, but six months later the entire camp is evicted. The scenes are linked through the narration of Safi, 35, from Afghanistan. At the end of the play, it transpires that he is narrating the story from the UK where he is waiting to claim asylum.

It's significant that of the 19 characters in the play, two are French officers and five are British volunteers; thus 36% of the play's characters are not refugees. Of the seven scenes, only one does not feature the volunteers. It's their story too. On the back cover of the text the synopsis highlights the stories of Okot, who wants nothing more than to get to the UK, and Beth, who wants nothing more than to help him, thus drawing a parallel between refugee and English volunteer. We are then invited to join the "hopeful, resilient residents," who are specified as refugees and volunteers. Murphy and Robertson, who themselves were volunteers at the real Jungle, do not shy away from showing the tensions between the two states of being, particularly at the beginning when the volunteers are mistrusted, and when the Jungle is threatened with demolition. When the volunteers are introduced in scene three through the character of Boxer, a drunk Englishman, Murphy and Robertson take the bold step of aligning refugees and volunteers as one through his voice: "Everyone here is running from something. We're all refugees" (Murphy & Robertson, 2018, p. 44). Each volunteer then describes what they are running away from: an ex-wife and custody battle, men, and getting into university debt for three years. They are relatable. Derek, who is in his fifties, asserts that he is running towards and not away: "Community. I've found things here that have all but disappeared in Britain" (Murphy & Robertson, 2018, p. 45), whilst 18-year-old Sam states he is here to be a witness.

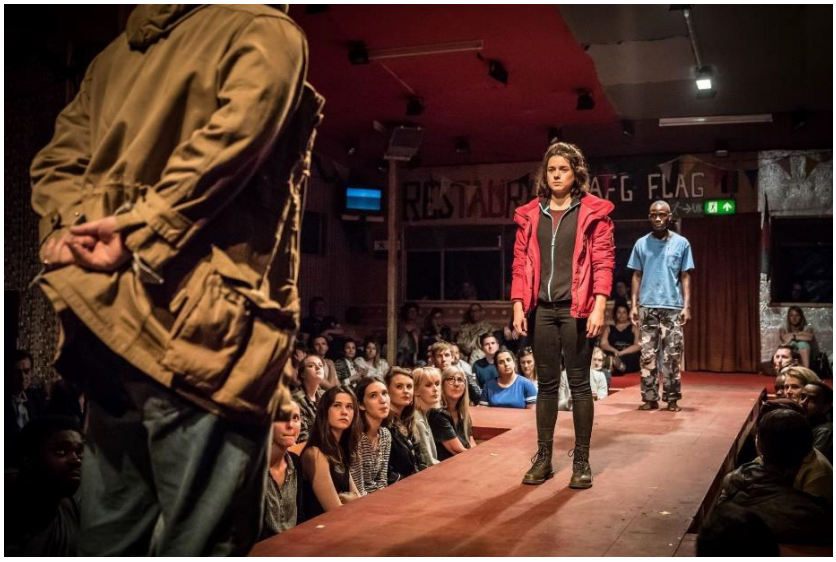

Figure 3. Rachel Redford, Beth and John Pfumojena, Okot in The Jungle West End (photo: Marc Brenner).

In her introduction to *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis: Performing Global Identities*, a groundbreaking book on theatre and refugees, Alison Jeffers argues that Western governments avoid clear distinctions between refugees and economic migrants to justify measures to prevent refugees entry (Jeffers, 2011, p. 6). Through this play we experience the very people who are causing what Jeffers describes as "moral panic" in the UK, USA, and Australian media (Jeffers, 2011, pp. 16-42). The play plunges us into an unofficial camp, where we bear witness to it having no support from international charities yet subjected to draconian rules from the French and the British.

The Jungle, through its text, production, and educational campaign, provides information the audience has not received from mainstream media. We are a captive audience, not one scrolling through newspapers online, avoiding what makes us uncomfortable. I certainly missed reading about the European Union (EU) ruling that allows unaccompanied children to be reunited with families in EU countries, but this detail is impossible to miss as an audience member of *The Jungle*. The character of 50-something Paula spells it out in a monologue (Murphy & Robertson, 2018, p. 52) with graphic language describing "our Home Secretary Teresa darling buds of fucking May, doesn't give a shit." The nine-line monologue ends with humour as she asks for her "fucking phone back" from 15-year-old Norullah from Afghanistan, a device which reconnects to the action in the play. This device is amplified with the final words in the monologue "End of speech," which

tells us, the audience, that this indeed was a speech for us. The language throughout the monologue signals that the writers want the audience to absorb it: "Dublin III. Remember that name." In spelling out the law that unaccompanied children have the right to be reunited with family the monologue adds: "Legally. In a Eurostar. Not on top of one."

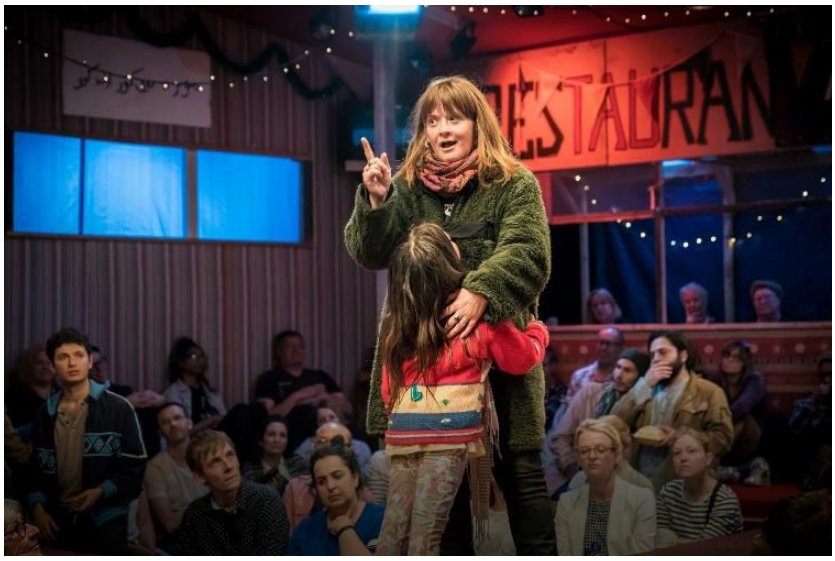

Figure 4. Jo McInnes, Paula in *The Jungle West End* (photo: Marc Brenner).

Through Beth, who is only 18, we learn about the term "virtue-signaling" coined by journalist James Bartholomew. "You're not actually doing anything" is a line that hits the audience (Murphy & Robertson, 2018, p. 92). Beth's monologue ends with a reminder about Parliament as a place where laws are made. She raises the audience's awareness that we can no longer believe in this parliament's virtue signaling, because people who are escaping a regime have the human right to do so: "The British Government. The French Government. The United Nations. The European fucking Union. Where the fuck are you?" The most prescient line about refugees follows: "Until they are standing at our door, screaming for help." Sadly, help is not what refugees have received standing at any doorways whether it's dangerously crossing the English Channel, or the borders of Poland and Belarus, Afghanistan-Pakistan, or any other borders with desperate migrants.

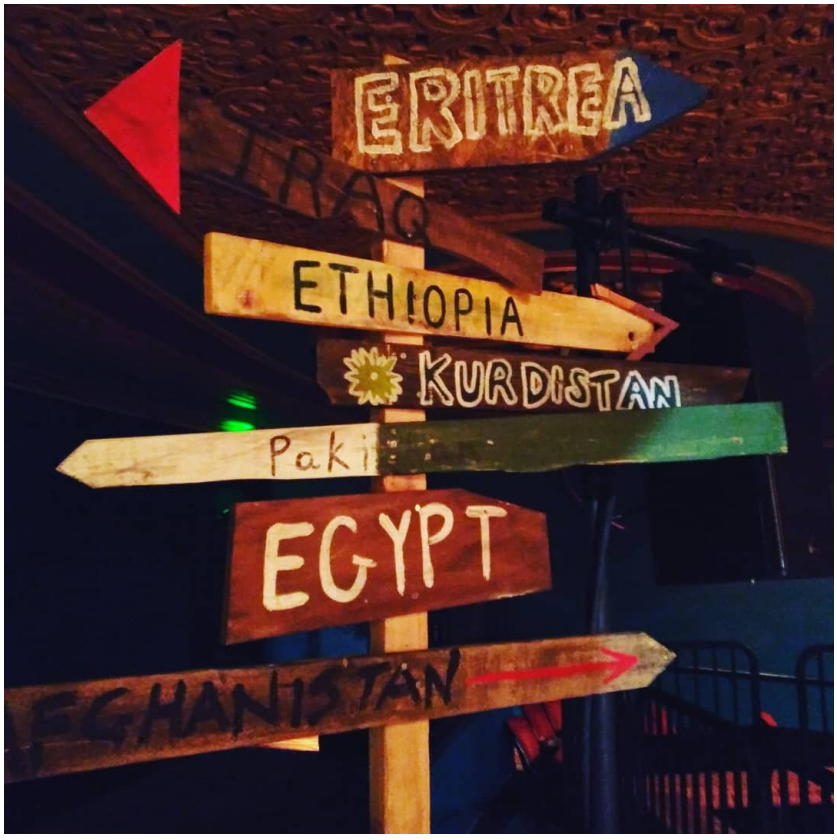

Figure 5. Detail of *The Jungle* set (photo: Anthonye Quality).

In the production Miriam Buether's award-winning design transforms the theatre space into the Jungle and takes the audience to this liminal border space (see Figure 5). When we, the audience, enter any of the theatre spaces, we experience the makeshift restaurant before the play begins. Off-stage we may see a section with provisions such as flour and tins (see Figure 6), or a makeshift bed and photo of people left behind (see Figure 7). As we approach our seats, some audience members are offered hot chai and naan bread. It's a novel creative decision because the convention is that we feel guilty and sorry for refugees, but here there is a frisson of excitement. The writers and directors choose first to show us hope and resilience, before desperation and disappointment.

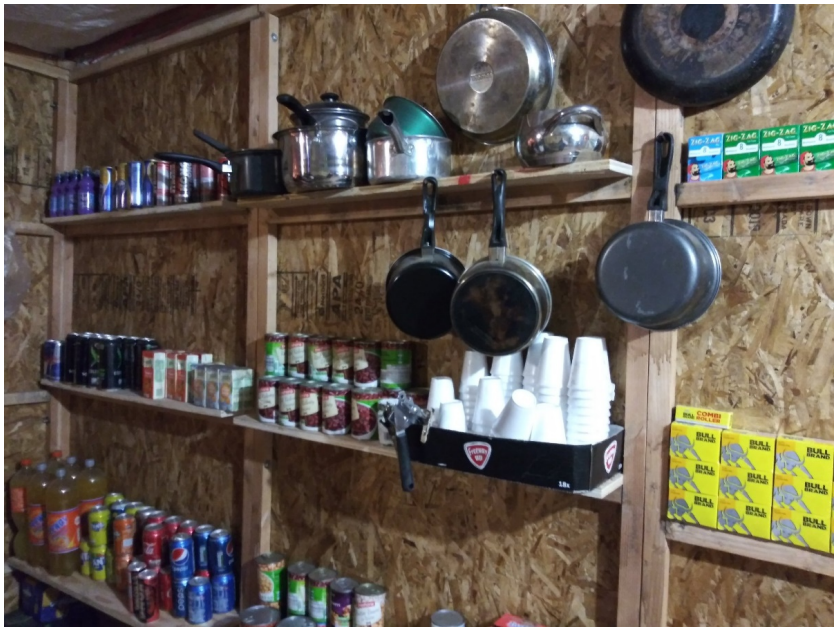

Figure 6. Detail of *The Jungle* set (photo: Anthonye Quality).

The auditorium is transformed into a restaurant with banquette style seating divided into different sections, with banners delineating the seating areas as different countries, a constant reminder that the refugees come from somewhere else, and this is their temporary, make-shift home. We, the audience, sit in those seats. For the duration of the play, we are physically part of its setting. For the most part, the text does not refer to the terminology of refugees, the displaced, asylum seekers, forced migrants and migrants. By limiting its use of these terms, we are invited to view its characters as people alongside whom we sit. We meet the residents before the convention of lights going down, and the lighting design for much of the play allows us to see each other as an audience. In the final scene when the cast shines lights on Safi, it's as if now they are also the audience, spectating the asylum seeker who is demonized in the press.

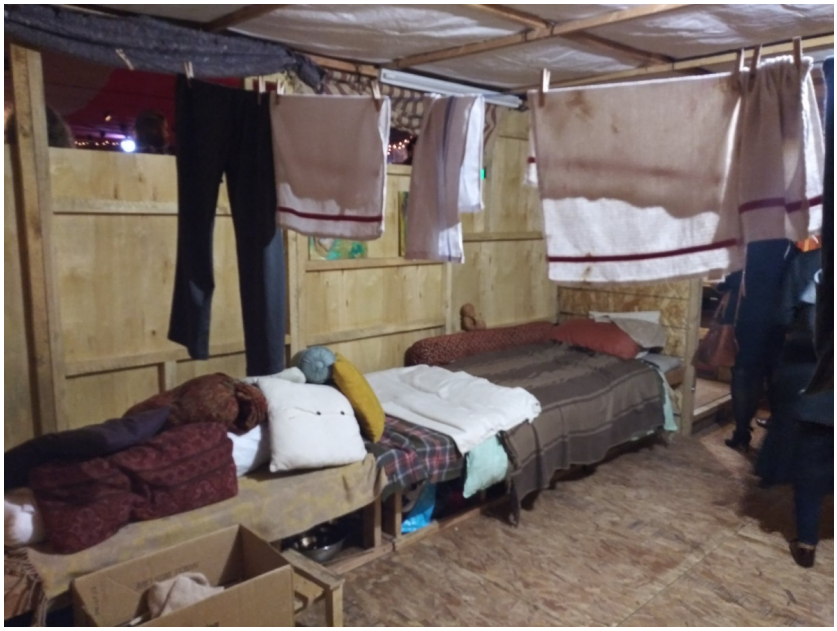

Figure 7. Detail of *The Jungle* set (photo: Anthonye Quality).

Conversations Made Possible

From the outset of developing this political play the writers wanted a broad audience and aimed to create a safe space from which to create "dangerous conversations." The producers and directors shared the vision that the play's function was to open a conversation. Friedman described it as a conversation of national importance that she wanted to have in the West End (WhatsOnStage, 2018). In a two-part interview titled "'The Jungle' Director: Refugee rhetoric is nonsense," Stephen Daldry told CNN presenter Christiane Amanpour that he wanted to do the play because of the political climate against refugees, while in the interview actor Amar Haj Ahmad described how Daldry told the cast to go out on stage and change the world (Amanpour, 2018a, 2018b).

The fact that Murphy and Robertson have not themselves experienced displacement does not prevent them from having empathy *and* taking action. In representing themselves in the play through the volunteers, they challenge passive spectators to become politically and socially active when we leave our seats. For me, their call has translated into research on the mental health of refugees and the desire to contribute to this field.

The playwrights and producers provided an acknowledgement I, as a refugee, have waited for since 1974, when on July 20th the BBC News

announced the invasion of Cyprus at 6.am Cyprus time, before we had any idea what was happening. The British Government failed at the time to fulfil its obligations as a guarantor of peace on my parents' island and has never taken responsibility for its part in dividing the island's communities with its colonial policies. But this play allowed me to fully grasp the fact that the British government plays an ongoing role in depriving the displaced of their homes. This play represents a form of truth and reconciliation, giving me a voice that was shut down from 1974 to 2018, because people in the UK were not yet open to the conversation I wanted and needed to have.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Naomi Webb and the Good Chance Theatre team.

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