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The Country Wife.

Between Pragmatic Analysis and Translation

Edited by Alba Graziano

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FRANCESCA FORLINI*

Challenging Narratives: Immersive Practices and the Representation of the Refugee Experience in Clare Bayley's *The Container*

Abstract

First performed inside a container lorry at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2007, Clare Bayley's *The Container* takes an unconventional approach to altering British perceptions of the refugee crisis, bespeaking the changing reality of migration histories. By looking at the major challenges faced by theatre makers in representing the refugee experience, this article seeks to reflect on the relatively recent turn towards immersive and participatory practices witnessed by contemporary British theatre. It does so by discussing the major challenges faced by theatrical representations of the refugee experience examining the primary issues that arise when attempting to present or represent the refugee experience on stage. How does contemporary British theatre complicate stereotyped media representations of forced migrants? How can it renovate our understanding of the global refugee crisis? Drawing upon studies such as Emma Cox's *Theatre & Migration* (2014) and Alison Jeffers *Refugees, Theatre and Crisis: Performing Global Identities* (2011), this contribution reflects on the increasing attention towards issues of displacement and migration as manifested by the most recent proliferation of community drama workshops, refugee festivals and grand scale productions in the UK, arguing that refugee theatre can serve as a valuable space for real life's institutional and extra-institutional encounter, fostering understanding and cohesion and bringing about real change.

KEYWORDS: immigrant theatre; refugee theatre; site-specificity; *The Container*; Clare Bayley

1. Entering *The Container*

It's dark, it's cramped, and it's not usually the best place to hold a performance. Yet, for director Tom Wright, a shipping container was the ideal stage for a play exploring the challenges and determination of illegal migrants trying to make their way to the west in search of a better life. Clare Bayley's *The Container* – first created for a trio of school performances in the Thames Gateway area – not only dramatises that terrifying experience as one of the key journeys of our time, but sets the action inside a real container parked outside the Young Vic Theatre, in central London. The effect is devastating. As the big metal doors slam shut on the audience, the spectators are plunged

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into the sweaty darkness of a different world that is only inches away from us, as we go about our daily lives.

Since its premiere at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2007, where it won both a Fringe First award and the Amnesty Freedom of Expression award, Clare Bayley's play has been produced in containers in Cardiff, Toronto, Melbourne and Texas, as well as in Mexico and Germany. In 2013, Kwame Kwei Armagh – the only Black, male artistic director within America's top hundred theatres and the first African-Caribbean director to run a major British theatre – produced the play at Baltimore Centre Stage, in the US. In 2014, the Digital Theatre version of Tom Wright's production was broadcasted on London Live TV. Interestingly, in the same year, the play was also translated into Italian and staged by Carlo Emilio Lerici at Teatro Belli, in Rome.

Given the wide range of productions made available in the last couple of decades, it seems crucial to point out that the focus of this article is on the revival staged in 2009 outside the Young Vic Theatre and made available for streaming on the Digital Theatre platform. By looking at the major challenges faced by theatrical representations of the refugee experience, the first section of the article discusses the play in light of the increasing attention of contemporary British theatre towards issues of displacement and migration as manifested by the increasing availability of community drama workshops, refugee festivals and grand scale productions in the UK. How can theatre complicate stereotyped media representations of forced migrants? How can it renovate our understanding of the global refugee crisis? By looking at the major challenges faced by theatrical representations of the refugee experience, the article moves on to examine three primary issues that arise when attempting to present or represent the refugee experience on stage: 1) the ethical implications of speaking on behalf of the other; 2) the tendency to aestheticise violence and trauma; and 3) the risk of reinforcing oppositions by portraying the refugee experience through the performance of victimhood. Reflecting on the relatively recent turn towards immersive and participatory practices witnessed by refugee theatre, this contribution argues that refugee theatre can serve as a valuable space for real life's institutional and extra-institutional encounter, fostering understanding and cohesion and bringing about change.

2. *The Container: Being an Audience for Refugee Theatre*

In a bluish semidarkness illuminated by handheld torches wielded by audience members and actors, five characters begin their journey towards an uncertain fate. The cloistered space is empty when the small group of twenty-eight people from the audience is first escorted inside, allowing

them time to take in the bleak, claustrophobic set design devised by Naomi Dawson. The seats are wooden pallets covered in blankets set against the longer sides of the container, a configuration which turns the space into a thrust stage. The tenuous light filtering from the entrance reveals a number of wooden crates. The unfurnished metal walls of the container reinforce the grudgingly sparse and cramped nature of the space. Gradually, the actors step into the container, unobtrusive to the point that it is easy to mistake them for audience members, their plain clothes allowing them to mingle with the small audience and thus straightforwardly and effectively challenging the distinction between 'subject' and 'object' of the performance.

The show begins mid ride: when the doors are shut the whole space starts rumbling and vibrating to create a convincing illusion of being on a moving vehicle, the result of designer Naomi Dawson and sound designer Adrienne Quartly's combined efforts. Inside the pitch-black container, someone lights up a torch. There are four people aboard: Fatima (Doreene Blackstock) and Asha (Mercy Ojelade), two Somali women that have escaped from a refugee camp in Africa and that pose as mother and daughter; Ahmad (Hassani Shapi), a wealthy businessman from Afghanistan; and Jemal (Abhin Galeya), a Kurd who wants to reunite with his family after having been denied his asylum application. Naturally, the geographical origins of the characters are not casual. Fatima and Asha are originally from Somalia, a country that has one of the highest migration rates in the world, due to the civil war and to the massive refugee crisis that the country has been facing since the fall of dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991 (OCHA 2021). Ahmad is fleeing Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime following the joint U.S. and British invasion in late 2001, while Jemal is trying to make it back to the UK, the country that has deported him back to Turkey after having granted him asylum. Taken together, the backstories of Bayley's characters highlight the massive scale and global impact of the issue of forced migration and evoke the major conflicts that have radically shaped the geography of the modern world until 2014, when war knocked on the door of Eastern Europe.

The reference here is to Russian annexation of Crimea following Ukraine's political shift towards the European Union. The annexation was widely condemned by the international community and led to ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine, particularly in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Despite the gap of almost twenty years that separates the piece from the time of writing, the numbers generated by these conflicts still rival the scale of those caused by the Russia-Ukraine war and major natural disasters such as the twin earthquakes that struck Syria and Turkey on 6 February 2023. With an estimated 3.8 million people internally displaced across the country, Somalia currently has more internal displaced persons (IDPs) than the Syrian Arab Republic (OCHA, 2023) and was only recently surpassed by

Ukraine with 5.1 million IDPs (IOM, 2023). In 2022, Afghan refugees were still the third largest displaced population in the world after Syrian and Ukrainian refugees (UNHCR, 2022) and the Kurdish-Turkish war had claimed at least some 40,000 lives, the vast majority of them Kurdish civilians. A figure that is even more tragic when we consider that the last report was in 2016 and that the casualties of the Russian-Ukrainian war as of July 2023 amounted to a verified total of 9,369 civilian deaths (OHCHR, 2023).

The show reaches its turning point when a fifth person is suddenly let on, Mariam (Amber Agar) who, like Ahmad, is from Afghanistan. She has food, which she is prepared to share to overcome the wariness of her fellow travelers. Yet, the mysterious illness that afflicts her, which we later discover is due to her pregnancy, sets her apart from the others. As the show progresses, the characters barter for food and water, all the while revealing different backstories and survival strategies, all in the hope of making it across the Channel. They have already spent days locked in their mobile prison when the agent who organised their passage demands more money in order to get them across the border between England and France. Some of them do not have the money or are unwilling to lose more. Jemal offers to pay for the young Somali girl, Asha, but no one is prepared to do the same for Mariam, who is left to find – and the suggestion is here deliberately ambiguous – “another way to pay” (2007, 43).

Immigration has always been an integral part of our country’s make up, and never more so than now. Yet despite this, the coverage these stories get in much of the mainstream media focuses entirely on a xenophobic, NIMBY-ish little Englander point of view. The real story – the story of what people have come from, what they have gone through to get here, and what they are confronted with when they do arrive – is largely ignored. As a playwright, it was this I wanted audiences to understand. And if they could get some sense of what those stories involved by experiencing them from the inside of a container, then so much the better. (Bayley qtd in Sinnott 2016)

Bayley’s thoughts on the play and its rationale are clearly outlined in the blog documenting the original production. Here, the urgency of confronting the reality of forced migration is linked to a crucial element of performance: the audience.

As Alison Jeffers has already noted in a collection of essays on refugee performance edited by Michael Balfour (2013), much of the writing that has emerged in recent years has devoted little attention to exploring the role of the audience in refugee theatre. Since the early 1990s, the UK has witnessed a significant growth in arts and cultural activities among community groups made up of refugees and asylum seekers (Barnes 2009; Gould 2005; Kidd et al. 2008). Driven by the emergence of this liminal figure in the work of Black

and Asian women playwrights, as evidenced by plays like Amrit Wilson's *Survivors* (1999) and Tanika Gupta's *Sanctuary* (2002), the growing interest of the British theatre sector in the refugee or asylum seeker as opposed to the economic migrant has led to a proliferation of community drama workshops, refugee festivals and theatre projects engaging with refugee community groups.¹ In 2005, Creative Exchange undertook one of the first national studies to assess the role of arts and culture in the integration of refugees and asylum seekers. The study identified 76 refugee arts projects in the UK, with a higher concentration in London (Gould 2005), a number that was set to grow exponentially. By 2008, the authors of *Arts and Refugees in the UK: History, Impact and the Future* reported over 200 arts projects operating in the UK and mostly concentrated in London, Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow and other urban centres (Kidd et al. 2008).

In 2020, Migrants in Theatre, a movement of first-generation migrant theatre artists and companies who have come together to campaign for more and better representation of foreign-born artists in British theatre, widened the scope of the existing research and began circulating a survey to gather information on migrants' experiences in the industry. The preliminary report, included in the collective's founding document, not only addressed issues of representation and misrepresentation of migrant artists in the UK, but also highlighted the deep discrepancies between the government support offered in response to COVID-19 and the rapidly approaching, still unclear Brexit (MIT 2021). The growing interest in refugee theatre in the UK is intricately linked to the simultaneous rise in audience-related activities. As this genre gains prominence, there is a heightened awareness of the pivotal role the audience plays in shaping the narrative and fostering empathy. Productions often incorporate interactive elements, post-performance discussions, and community engagements to not only enhance the audience's understanding of the refugee experience but also to encourage active participation and reflection. The synergy between the subject matter and audience-related activities is part of a collective effort to bridge understanding and build

¹ The diversity of taxonomic categories reflects the intricate nature of the migratory phenomenon. According to Amnesty International, an asylum seeker is an individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualised procedures, an asylum seeker is someone who is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim. Amnesty International defines a refugee as someone fleeing their country due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion. The definition does not cover displaced people due to environmental disasters. Thirdly, an economic migrant is someone who leaves their country of origin purely for financial and/or economic reasons. Consequently, economic migrants do not meet the criteria for refugee status and are not eligible for international protection (Amnesty International 2023).

connections, emphasising the transformative power of theatre in fostering compassion and awareness.

In response to the growing demand for representation, visibility and support infrastructure, the UK arts sector has witnessed an increase in collaborations between theatres and refugee organisations in recent decades. In 2014, the West Yorkshire Playhouse became UK's first Theatre of Sanctuary, establishing a singing group for refugee women, as well as workshops and educational events for refugees and asylum seekers. In 2016, the Young Vic followed in its footsteps, winning the Sanctuary Award for the Arts for hosting the Beyond Borders conference in partnership with Counterpoints Arts and Platforma and for dedicating an entire season to exploring the lives of refugees. In the same year, SBC (Stand up and Be Counted) became the first Theatre Company of Sanctuary for their work around detention involving an asylum seeker in research and for giving her the lead role in the play *Tanya*. By 2019, it was clear that Theatres of Sanctuary would become a national network. To date, thirty-seven theatre companies and theatres have joined the project. However, such an understandable focus on refugees, on their experiences, and on the ways in which participatory theatre and community-engaged projects have proven beneficial, has meant that the act of being the audience for this work has mostly been ignored.

According to Alison Jeffers, the absence of any significant body of writing that systematically addresses audience experience and identity in refugee theatre has inevitably led to audiences being divided into two broad categories (2011). The first one includes people who are new to the issue and that are therefore perceived to be in need of education. This calls for performances that aim to articulate the experience of refugees and their condition of migrancy, exposing the difficulties that migrants face in the process of applying for asylum, in dealing with trauma and in integrating into the new lives and circumstances in which they find themselves. The second category is at the opposite end of the spectrum and includes a more knowledgeable audience, who attend refugee theatre out of solidarity with the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. Having identified these two categories, Jeffers asserts that neither of them is accurate or helpful in assessing the impact of refugee theatre. Indeed, many recent publications in audience studies have challenged the idea of the audience as a monolithic entity (Kjeldsen 2018, Reason et al. 2022).

Similarly, I argue that assumptions about the monolithic nature of the audience prove to be particularly unhelpful in understanding what actually happens in a theatrical exchange, especially when this complexity is further deepened by the fact that the relationship between performer and audience is particularly unstable in refugee theatre. To put it into Helen Freshwater's words, "there may be several distinct coexisting audiences to

be found among the people gathered together to watch a show” (2009, 9). As individual audience members, we attend a theatre performance “with varying capacities, from varying positions, from different interests from one moment to the next” (Rayner 1993, 4), but we also approach the experience conscious that we will be sharing it with other people. When people come to see a piece of refugee theatre or a play about illegal migration, they are signalling not only a willingness to listen, but also a desire to listen as a group. What happens then when we shift the focus to look at this collective body from the point of view of audience-actor interaction? Once the ‘we’ of the audience is transformed into a ‘you’, then the performers also become a ‘you’. This creates what Alice Rayner has defined as “simultaneous subjectivity” (1993, 13). By not being afraid to categorise refugee performers as ‘you’ in the sense of ‘not us’, their otherness becomes “not a datum for knowledge but a condition of interest and dialogue” (Rayner 1993, 15).

In Clare Bayley’s play, it is precisely this configuration that allows for a face-to-face encounter between performer and audience, and symbolically between refugees and non-refugees. Here, simultaneous subjectivity creates the grounds for a dialogic relationship that raises questions about the apparent stability of the two categories: in what ways and to what extent are we a ‘we’? And more importantly, how do we respond to the questions of responsibility for the other that are addressed to us from the stage? On a spatial level, the seating arrangement in Tom Wright’s production reflects this approach. Indeed, the parliamentary configuration adopted is not only a figurative nod to the call for political activism, but also a device that forces the audience to confront the action on stage and themselves. In order to gain a better understanding of the hardships that refugees are forced to endure in the name of the protection of state borders, in the name of us as citizens, audiences of the Young Vic production are asked to sit shoulder-to-shoulder in the face-to-face theatrical encounter and to stand together in the act of considering how to respond to the interaction of the performance both during and after the show. The act of watching a piece of refugee theatre therefore challenges the audience to rethink their critical position and to enter into a set of relationships that Mireille Rosello has aptly described as “a complicated ballet of proposals [and] expectations” (Rosello 2001, 127). On the one hand, the audience occupies a privileged position. By giving refugees a voice and a space to share their stories, they place themselves in a hierarchical relationship with the refugees, keeping them in their place (Smith 2014, 183). It is a system of power relations that can be framed by drawing on gift theory from the work of Marcel Mauss (1954), Jacques Derrida (1992), Pierre Bourdieu (1997), and recent work by Helen Nicholson (2014). Like gifts, the offer of a “hospitable stage” has a positive connotation. However, it can often be hierarchical: those able to give are in a position of

privilege, and, as Mauss argues, gifts are often self-interested because of the implicit debt and the social obligation to reciprocate and to conform to the expectations of the giver. On the other hand, the presence of the audience is also a form of commitment through an act of trust and generosity. In the process of listening to refugee stories told through the medium of theatre, the audience amplifies the experiences of storytellers by allowing them to engage with a wider audience and to participate in the process of building a civility. As Alison Jeffers has pointed out, “this process is not about creating exclusivities but about coming to an understanding of the ways in which these stories also become part of our civility” (2013, 308).

Civil listening allows us to distance ourselves from feelings of togetherness while still demonstrating a commitment to dialogue. This seems particularly evident in a play where storytelling is so prominent that it almost erases all action, and where we, as an audience, can do little other than use our privileged position to amplify these stories and increase their chances of being heard. In “I Am Not Your Canvas” (2019), Anna Gotlib sheds light on the risks associated with speaking on behalf of the other, explaining how the efforts to embrace the singularity of others can end up perpetrating a veiled form of colonialism, normalising and erasing the essential uniqueness of the other. “Even the nonxenophobic, well-meaning master narratives – the ones designed to inspire empathy for the downtrodden refugee, casting a kindly eye on the homeless migrant – can be both morally and epistemically damaging to the refugee and self-complimentary to the narrators” (243) she writes, concluding that by giving voice to these master narratives, we “not only silence but also create spaces of liminality where refugees are unable to engage as moral agents” (Gotlib 2019, 248). Are the voiceless truly voiceless? If so, who has taken their voices away?

3. Voicing the Refugee: Aestheticising Trauma and the Hero Narrative

When it comes to refugee theatre, issues of storytelling and representation become even more sensitive. Indeed, while theatrical modes of representation seek to inclusively portray the invisible and voiceless foreigner, in refugee theatre this intention is often challenged by the paradox, inherent in the staging process, of having to embody a condition based on non-presence from a perspective that is often aligned with societal norms. In *Performance, Identity, and Immigration: a Theatre of Undocumentedness*, Gad Guterman examines the paradox of refugee representation, highlighting the challenges and the risks of making present for audiences a condition based on non-presence. In his analysis, Guterman explores the implications of casting refugee and non-refugee actors in refugee roles. On the one hand, he

notes that having non-refugee actors play refugee characters can deprive refugees of valuable opportunities for representation and contribute to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. On the other hand, having refugee actors expose their situation as undocumented migrants can put pressure on them to assimilate to the cultural norms of the host country and to conform to the expectations of the audience. Therefore, Guterman (2014) concludes that having refugee actors perform their own experiences can be just as morally and epistemologically damaging as having non-refugee actors give voice to refugee accounts, as both attempts can ultimately end up silencing and limiting refugees' agency.

The Container addresses the paradox of refugee representation on two levels: the dramaturgical and the performative. On the dramaturgical level, the narrative of Afghan, Somali, Kurdish and Turkish refugees is entrusted to a white, middle-class English woman and to a cast of non-refugee actors. In a note on her blog published on the occasion of the opening of *The Container* at Canadian Stage, Bayley explains how the urgency of making the refugee condition present for British audiences led her to take on the challenge of writing from a refugee perspective, despite her radically different background. Indeed, when she was first commissioned to write the play, people were just starting to arrive in the UK, smuggled in the back of lorries:

All the headlines in the right wing press were about the 'flood' of 'migrants' sneaking into our country in order to steal our jobs and claim our benefits. I felt that the picture needed to be put straight. When I was in the middle of writing it, fifty-eight Chinese students were found suffocated inside a locked container at Dover. When that happened, I wondered whether I could continue to write the play. Then, I realised it was more important than ever. The people inside these trucks and containers had to be known. (Bayley 2016)

At that time, no one else was addressing the issue from the refugees' perspective. So, *The Container* came to fill that gap. Then, when hundreds of thousands of people started crossing the Mediterranean, walking through Greece and Hungary, the issue of forced migration started to get media attention. By the time the play was ready to be transferred to the stage, refugees were telling their own stories. Newspapers received personal accounts. Broadcasters gave people cameras to document their journeys. The story itself was already in the mainstream. At one point, Bayley felt that her work was losing its meaning. But she came to the conclusion that her job, as an artist, was "to attempt to portray the world as seen through other people's eyes. Not just to write about herself. That meant writing about Afghans, Somalis, Kurds and Turks. And incidentally, that also meant providing jobs for actors of different ethnicities" (Bayley 2016).

For Bayley, the real challenge of making refugee theatre was learning how to deal with stories without exploiting or appropriating them. It was a challenge that Bayley approached keeping in mind an incident with her mother that had happened at the beginning of her career. At the time, Bayley was writing a short story based on her mother's personal account of her evacuation to Toronto during the Second World War. The story and its emotional impact were so vivid in her mind that Bayley felt entitled to appropriate the material without asking for permission: "I wrote my first ever short story about it and presented it proudly to my mother. To my shock, she was horrified and angry. She said it wasn't my story to tell" (2016). This incident made Bayley realise the dangers of telling other people's stories, and the importance of approaching storytelling with a deep understanding of the complexities involved. A lesson that she put into practice in the writing of *The Container*.

Mindful of the risks of appropriating other people's stories, in *The Container* the playwright and the performers make no attempt to voice the refugees' stories directly. Instead, the play emerges as a product of interviews with people who have first-hand experience of being smuggled and living as refugees. These people shared their stories on condition of anonymity, usually because they were waiting for their asylum applications to be processed and feared that anything they said might be used against them. As a result, Bayley had to conceal the individual identities of her subjects and reshape their stories. This process of manipulation and reimagining resulted in a play that is ultimately a work of fiction, based on careful research. One of the most problematic aspects, which Bayley has managed to avoid by relying less heavily on verbatim material, is the re-enactment of trauma through the portrayal of violence and suffering in the refugee narratives. Having reworked the original narratives that inspired the play and having cast non-refugee actors, Bayley's show did not move along the lines of legal processes such as Refugee Status Determination (RSD), which require refugees and asylum seekers to perform their experiences of persecution – both to tell their stories and to convince judges of their suffering (Jeffers 2011; Wake 2013; Cox 2014). Mindful of the crucial influence that the performance of victimhood has on the trajectory of a refugee's life, Bayley distances herself from what Jeffers has termed "bureaucratic performance", highlighting how most refugee narratives of persecution rely heavily on the language of trauma and evidence of post-traumatic stress disorder to make a compelling case (2008, 217). Authentic identity as a refugee is inextricably linked to the aestheticisation of violence and trauma. As Anna Street (2021) has pointed out, the identity of refugees "depends upon carefully and convincingly presenting their stories of fear, shame, and degradation". Refugee performance also generates expectations about the kind of theatre and the topics that are to be explored. The risk of

transferring such performances to the stage, therefore, is that of re-enacting the very system they seek to oppose. By casting non-refugee actors for the Young Vic production, Bayley has managed to avoid the dangers of literal translation or naturalistic repetition of trauma identified by Julie Salverson (1999), who warns of the reductive and potentially re-violating effects of refugee plays.

Bayley's play thus demonstrates how the attempt to construct a discourse around refugee performance is caught up in an unwavering paradox. On the one hand, as stated, the legal process of gaining asylum requires evidence of trauma that is meticulously constructed as a form of performance. On the other hand, theatre adopts these very criteria for aesthetic purposes. Against this background, Bayley's decision to transform verbatim material into a fictional narrative based on thorough research and to cast non-refugee actors is both problematic and ethical. It is problematic in that it may undermine the very goals it seeks to achieve by depriving refugees of the opportunity to speak for themselves. Yet, it is ethical because it refuses to commodify the refugee experience and to promote simplistic messages. Within this framework, the role of the audience is also crucial. Just as the playwright's choice to portray the refugee as 'the other' can be done in ways that victimise rather than validate, so too can the audience thrust them into configurations of superiority or oppression. In her analysis, Jeffers highlights a common trend in cultural productions centered on the refugee experience. Often linked to the pressure to meet the criteria of bureaucratic performance, these representations, according to Jeffers, focus on portraying refugees as victims of trauma and persecution (2011, 129).

This desire for empathy and emotional connection can lead to an oversimplification of the refugee experience, reducing it to a one-dimensional narrative focused solely on suffering. Katrin Sieg notes that this kind of representation is prevalent in verbatim and documentary theatre produced by human rights organisations (2016). However, despite their good intentions, such efforts tend to oversimplify the refugees' stories of resilience, resourcefulness, and agency. By focusing exclusively on depictions of victimhood and trauma, these representations risk perpetuating a skewed and incomplete understanding of the refugee experience. There is also a risk that such representations cast refugees in a heroic light, as in Liisa H. Malkki's depiction of the "saintly refugee" (1996). According to this trope, refugees are portrayed as myth-busters, whose contribution to society is so significant that it seems capable of dispelling all negative stereotypes. Although well-intentioned, the emphasis on what refugees have to offer and on their potential to contribute to the nation can, according to Bonnie Honig, "feed into the xenophobic anxiety that they might really be takers from it" (2001, 199). Thus, while aiming to counteract negative perceptions of

refugees, the push to portray them as endearing and heroic may inadvertently exacerbate existing divisions and reinforce the ‘us versus them’ divide.

This is not to say, of course, that these configurations cannot be creatively subverted. Indeed, when established oppositions such as us/ them, judge/victim, citizen/refugee, inside/outside are skillfully transformed into uncomfortable experiences, the deliberate construction of a binary can paradoxically undermine itself and appropriate the very normalised structures it seeks to establish. Conversely, the reverse holds true, and even the most immersive participatory performances, where the audience is encouraged to empathise with the refugee’s perspective, step into their shoes, and envision themselves as the other, may not necessarily challenge these pre-existing divisions. Instead, there is a genuine risk of inadvertently reinforcing these divisions. As Jeffers eloquently puts it:

interpellation and, more specifically, deliberately inaccurate interpellation within a theatrical frame is thus used to displace the refugee body in performance by re-placing it with the citizen’s body but all this does is to draw attention to the ways in which the citizen ultimately assumes the safety and security that comes with a sense of belonging. (2011, 67)

At times, the performative journey into the refugee experience can ironically lead us to cling all the more tightly to what we perceive as our inherent privileges. In the context of *The Container*, the interplay between audience engagement and the representation of refugees opens up new perspectives. Indeed, while the play may invite audiences to confront discomfort and challenge established perspectives, it is crucial to acknowledge that the form of engagement it generates does not inherently dissolve the entrenched distinctions between refugees and non-refugees. Instead, the play navigates a delicate equilibrium, aiming to creatively challenge audience positions while remaining mindful of the risk of reinforcing social divisions.

4. Refugee Theatre, Site-Specific Performance, and the Creative Agency of the Spectator

Conquergood’s exploration of de Certeau’s assertion that “what the map cuts up, the story cuts across” (1997, 126) underlines the transgressive boundaries between established forms of knowledge represented by “the map”, and the experiential, embodied knowledge of marginalised voices represented by “the story” (2002). This distinction becomes particularly relevant in the context of refugee performance, where individuals and communities in a host country must learn how to navigate the challenges of survival, reconstruct homes, process traumatic experiences, and find their place within new cultures.

In this context, both story and place can become sites of negotiation and resilience, helping people to adapt to new circumstances by forging a sense of belonging. In Bayley's play, space is not just a backdrop but a dynamic and integral element that contributes to the overall meaning, aesthetics, and impact of the production. According to Verónica Rodríguez, Bayley's play can be classified as a 'container play' (2022, 148). This genre finds antecedents in Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Bitte Liebt Österreich! (Please Love Austria! 2000)* and, less famously, in Maxim Biller's *Kühltransport: Ein Drama (Refrigerated Transport: A Drama 2001)*. While Michael Shane Boyle contends that "the story that propels *The Container* gives audiences little choice but to interpret the infrastructural aesthetic as a narrative device", this contribution posits that the symbolism of the container extends far beyond its mere narrative function (2016, 67).

Firstly, the idea of the container resonates deeply with the migrant experience, usually related to confinement in various ways: within bordered spaces, modes of transport, and in liminal spaces and states. Moreover, the container serves as a potent and contradictory symbol of globalisation. Essential for transporting consumer goods worldwide, it simultaneously conveys associations with pollution, dehumanisation, and objectification. On a dramaturgical level, Bayley's script is functional in showing how different forms of migration follow the path of globalisation. Forced to cross entire countries in order to reach Europe and the final leg of their journeys that will hopefully bring them to the UK, the route taken by each character in the play paradoxically represents a "spatial view of globalisation" because in each of these routes "spatial differences are convened under the sign of temporal sequence" from "underdeveloped" countries, through their "developing" neighbours, to the "developed" world of the global north (Massey, 82). According to Rodríguez, the staging and proxemic relations in the play further suggest that the theater and its audience are embedded in a globalised circuit of objectification (2022, 149). The close physical proximity between the cast and spectators implies a shared space, challenging any notion of disentanglement. This not only highlights the imbalanced positioning of the spectators but also suggests their potential to be in the migrants' position, emphasising the interconnectedness and interdependence of their status.

The proxemic relationship also encapsulates a sense of migratory aesthetics, with the confined space illuminated solely by torches, recreating the heat, smell, and claustrophobic conditions that often characterises the migrants' journey. This immersive symbiosis is heightened by staging the container in a public space within a specific borough with a high refugee population in the UK. These deliberate choices prompt broader reflections on space and the interconnectedness between the migrants' narrative, the audience, the public sphere, and the lived geography. Typically, citizens of the

host country are perceived as insiders, while migrants are seen as outsiders. As highlighted by Rodriguez, the staging of *The Container* challenges and disrupts established roles by situating the migrants – the outsiders – within the container and the UK while simultaneously situating the spectators – acknowledged as insiders – beyond the conventional comfort of the theatre building and the typical narrative presented by the media in the world of the outsiders (2022). Rather than framing audience members as mere witnesses, *The Container* attempts to bodily turn spectators into the characters it depicts. At the heart of the play's reception is the recognition that all the crucial features of the theatrical experience configured by the text function only by virtue of the fact that performers and spectators share a lived, embodied experience of space .

This pronounced emphasis on communal engagement and active participation achieved through the site-specific mode found striking resonance in the critical accounts of the 2009 production. Hermione Hobby's review for *The Guardian* emphasised the inadequacy of the term 'spectator' when applied to the experience of Tom Wright's production, where so much more than looking is being done and where all the senses are engaged. In her account, Hobby emphasised how the immersive setting and the close proximity of actors and audience members alike placed the audience in a very different relationship to the text, the site of the performance and their purpose for being there:

With the metallic door resounding shut and locked, the very notion of a "captive audience" takes on a renewed dimension. As the initial characters exchange their dialogue in hushed whispers, their torchlight beams traversing the confines of the container's walls, the audience finds themselves straining to perceive both sound and sight, juxtaposing the simulated cacophony of the lorry with the genuine urban hum outside. (Hobby 2009)

A similar review in *The Independent* emphasised the sense of physical and emotional discomfort caused not only by sitting in a confined space but also by the difficulty of seeing the actors:

The first few minutes are truly horrifying. In pitch darkness, the silence is broken only by the insistent, nausea-making vibrating sounds of a lorry in motion. After what feels like an eternity, the noise stops and a flashlight shines out of the black. Torches are the only lighting used in Tom Wright's production, often shining directly into the eyes of the audience as the action unfolds in a narrow, dusty strip down the middle of the container. It's all hugely uncomfortable – which is the point, of course. (Jones 2009)

Overall, the reviews' characterisation of the experience as unsettling and disturbing underscored that the immersive setting of *The Container*

profoundly enhanced audience engagement and the emotional resonance of the play. However, Bayley's decision to stage the play as a site-specific piece led the performance to engage far more deeply with its chosen location and with the social and political issues that are inextricably linked to place.

As Gay McAuley beautifully puts it, "anyone setting out to make a site-based performance must of necessity enter into negotiations with the owners of the site, those who currently occupy it, and those who have control over it: the police, fire brigade, usually the local council or other municipal authorities and, nowadays, insurance companies" (2005, 30). The tangible presence of the people who occupied or inhabited the container used for the performance as well as the sites outside it and the city of London itself, the traces of the people who had inhabited these spaces in the past, the histories of partially erased or contested occupations, became present in the performance and led the play to collaterally raise the issue of ownership: legal as well as commercial and moral. Ownership is an issue that has recently gained prominence in many countries in relation to issues of intellectual property and copyright. At the time of the production, however, this distinction held even greater political complexity in the UK, where it was at the heart of the many campaigns of the Right to Roam movement. Ownership is also a crucial issue when it comes to illegal migration, as it carries with it authority, power, rights, borders and their enforcement, privileges of exclusion, and privileges of inclusion.

Overall, *The Container's* site-specific approach reflects the recent interest in immersive and participatory practices witnessed in refugee theatre in the UK. Though still under-documented, the rise of refugee plays recurring to site-specific and immersive stagings can be attributed to several compelling motivations. As seen in Bayley's production, immersive approaches can help bridge the empathy gap between audiences and refugees, fostering a deeper understanding of the refugee experience and encouraging audiences to question their assumptions, challenge stereotypes, and develop a deeper sense of empathy. By involving audiences in the creation and performance of refugee stories, the site-specific mode can also become a platform for self-expression and agency, leading to a broader societal shift in attitudes towards refugees and fostering a more inclusive and empathetic society. However, while immersive and participatory practices offer promising perspectives for refugee theatre, we must not forget that they also present challenges and ethical considerations. Ensuring the emotional wellbeing of both performers and audiences is paramount, as immersive experiences can evoke intense emotions. In addition, avoiding sensationalising and trivialising refugee experiences is crucial to maintaining the integrity of the narratives presented. Ensuring authentic representation and participation is also essential. The line between genuine empowerment and exploitation can

be thin. It is therefore imperative to involve refugees in the creative process and provide a platform for diverse voices within the community. Finding the right balance between creative expression, artistic integrity, and ethical responsibility remains an open challenge.

5. Conclusion

The Container by Clare Bayley presents a thought-provoking and immersive exploration of the complex realities faced by refugees and asylum seekers. Through its unique site-specific setting, the play forces the audience to engage with the harrowing journeys and experiences of its characters within the confines of a shipping container. This intimate theatrical encounter blurs the boundaries between performer and audience, inviting them to confront the ethical and moral dilemmas posed by forced migration. The play delves into the personal stories of its characters, reflecting the global scope of displacement and migration caused by conflict. In so doing, it also speaks of the ethical complexities and the challenges of representing the stories and the experiences of marginalised people. The act of giving voice, even with well-meaning intentions, can paradoxically limit the agency of those being represented and confine them to a state of liminality. Navigating the complex intersections of storytelling and representation, *The Container* grapples with issues of authenticity and appropriation that are inherent in the process of transferring the refugee experience to the stage. Bayley's decision to transform verbatim material into a fictional narrative, based on meticulous research, and to cast non-refugee actors exemplifies a conscious effort to navigate this ethical terrain. The role of the audience in this narrative is also crucial. While immersive and participatory approaches aim to foster empathy and understanding, they too must be subject to critical scrutiny. The very act of stepping into the shoes of the other can paradoxically reinforce the divide between 'us' and 'them'. The representation of refugees as victims or heroes can oversimplify their experiences and inadvertently perpetuate dangerous stereotypes.

Amidst these complexities, *The Container* skillfully navigates the fine line between empathy and exploitation, awareness and appropriation. The play highlights the multifaceted nature of refugee experiences and underscores the need for respectful, ethical storytelling that reflects the true complexity of their lives. It serves as a reminder that the act of representation is a delicate process that requires a deep understanding of the voices being portrayed and a commitment to authentic, inclusive narratives. In the broader context of refugee theatre, this article provides a lens through which to critically engage with the representation of refugee experiences on stage. It challenges

creators to examine their intentions, methods, and the potential impact of their work, while inviting audiences to question their own perspectives and preconceived notions. Ultimately, the journey towards ethical representation in refugee narratives is an ongoing process that requires sensitivity, cultural awareness, and a genuine commitment to amplifying the voices of those whose stories are often silenced or overlooked.

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