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Why bother with theatre?

by Brian Woolland

When it is so hard to meet primary needs – food, shelter, health, language courses – why should we bother with theatre?

This article is a brief account of some of the extraordinary experiences I have recently experienced through my participation in a long term ERASMUS funded project, *The Promised Land*; and a reflection on those experiences and how they relate to possibilities of resistance, and specifically resistance to inhumane policies concerning the movement of people. There is insufficient space here to give details of *The Promised Land* project, but at the end of this article I have noted websites which do give a full account. Essentially the project is concerned with the position of new arrivals in Europe, valuing them as human beings with rich cultural backgrounds; and developing policies which enable them to contribute positively (both individually and collectively) to the societies they will be part of – because of who they are, and not despite their differences.

I was invited to take part in the project by Border Crossings (one of five organisations involved in the project). I am writing a report on each of five training weeks, and in due course will be writing a play drawing on the experiences of those weeks. I have had a close working relationship with Border Crossings over more than 20 years.

The project is organised around five ‘training weeks’. The first two of those took place in Adana, Turkey, in January 2018. The second was in Bologna, Italy, in April 2018. Thus far I have not personally led workshops, but I have observed some truly thought-provoking work and have had remarkable conversations with young people recently arrived in Turkey or Italy; conversations which were illuminating, inspirational and deeply challenging to many of our preconceived notions about ‘refugees’.

Adana

There are more than 3 million refugees in Turkey (probably more than 4 million if all the ‘illegal entrants’ are taken into account). Approximately 9% of these are housed in camps. The city of Adana has a population of 3 million. It is presently host to 300,000 refugees, i.e. 10% of the population of the city. 100,000 of these are not registered and therefore not eligible for any kind of education or support. On a personal level, I found myself overwhelmed and distressed by the sheer numbers involved.

But numbers are numbers, whether you hear them in Turkey or read them in England. What makes them real is when you witness at first hand the lives of the human beings they refer to; when you talk to people, when you listen to their stories, when they are heard. That is when you start to understand at an emotional level, when the shocking statistics begin to become meaningful. In our case, despite our physical proximity to it, we were to an extent shielded from the appalling situation in Turkey. Most of our direct contact with refugees was not in the camps or with people living on the streets or squatting in unfinished tower blocks, but in warm, well-lit classrooms in one of the NGO centres and in the university’s language centre. The young Syrian people who we met were all highly motivated to learn, and were keen to seek and accept help. But there are many people fleeing from the horrific war in Syria who are locked by trauma into anger and resentment. All the more reason to reach out to them rather than create barriers that deny them their humanity.

It felt a privilege to visit these classes, and to hear at first hand the extraordinary speeches given by young Syrians in the Turkish language classroom at the university. They spoke with such eloquence in expressing their feelings of hope. ‘In my city,’ said Fatma, ‘Everything is collapsed because of the war. But here there are bridges. And language is a bridge. We are hoping to build new bridges...’ Muhammed told us that his father had been a teacher, and that his mother was a ‘housewife’. He told us that when people ask her why she chooses not to work she says that it is because she ‘wants her birds to learn to fly first’. He went on to develop this metaphor of migrating birds. ‘Life is never easy for migrating birds,’ he said. But he clings on to hope. ‘We are learning a new language. And we have new hope. We will be teachers, engineers, doctors...’ Migrating. The adjective he used was carefully chosen. A precise metaphor. Most migrating animals make journeys driven by environmental necessity, and then they return. All the students in the room (about 20 of them) said that when the war is over they want to go back to Syria. But despite this exhilarating optimism, which has stayed with me and is in many ways truly inspirational, there was much that we were

told on these field visits which was deeply disturbing. We also heard several mentions of ‘holding centres’ for people who had been interviewed to be recognised for formal status, but had been found to be a ‘security risk’. What happens to those people who are sent to these centres? And then there were the refugee camps themselves. These are not called ‘camps’ but ‘accommodation settlements’ or ‘guest centres’. As Fatma, the young Syrian woman in the university language centre, so insightfully observed, language is a tool for building bridges. It can also be used to obfuscate. And euphemisms such as ‘guest centres’ are very dangerous.

Language as bridge building, however, is as potent and precise a metaphor as that of migrating birds. For a bridge to work it has to be built from both sides of the divide it spans. This echoes Paulo Freire’s argument that a pedagogy which treats learners as co-creators of knowledge is far more enriching for all than one in which learners are treated as empty vessels to have knowledge poured into them. The young people we met were clearly reaching out to us, building their side of the bridge. *The Promised Land* project at least gives us an opportunity to start building from our side too. In Amsterdam there is a bookshop called PAGES, which functions as a cultural and arts centre as well as a bookshop, and is run by a Syrian who arrived in the city in the early stages of the Syrian civil war, Samer al-Kadri. Al-Kadri wrote this, which resonates strongly with *The Promised Land* project, and is a reminder to us all that resistance and solidarity can take many forms...

‘We need builders to build houses, we need farmers, we need medicine, we need food. We need many things, but we also need art and culture. *Without culture, we don’t have anything...*’ (my italics)

<http://pagesbookstorecafe.com/amsterdam/>

Bologna

The second training week of the project was hosted and organised by Teatro dell’Argine (TdA). They proudly call themselves a ‘theatre for human development’, and their ethos and work echoes many of their guiding principles espoused and fostered over the years by NATD, most notably the Association’s aim to promote a ‘humanising curriculum’. They organise themselves as a social co-operative; and in addition to creating professional productions which have played in theatres throughout Europe, they run numerous theatre workshops and create theatre in prisons, in schools, in hospitals, with local communities, and with young people. When working with young people they try to ensure the groups are mixed; mixed racially, mixed ages, mixed cultural backgrounds. This means involving local Italians as well as people recently arrived in the city. The differences between people are thus celebrated, and no group can be easily categorised on ethnic, racial, religious, geographical or even linguistic grounds. This approach was exemplified in the extraordinary rehearsal session we were present at, which I describe below.

All the theatre they create (I use the word ‘theatre’ very broadly, including work for performances in large traditional theatre buildings, performances in non-theatrical

spaces, and exploratory workshop activities which may or may not lead to performance) is informed by aims which include the following:

- to be inclusive
- to enable
- and to offer means of expression and liberation to all participants.

Aims such as these are sometimes bandied about quite carelessly in grant applications and ‘mission statements’, with little thought about what they imply in terms of pedagogy. What was impressive about the work of TdA was that they seemed to be genuinely interrogating the concepts and using them in every aspect of their work.

The pedagogical principles underpinning their theatre practice also resonate strongly with those with which NATD readers will be familiar. It is worth repeating them here as a reminder that they are important in a wide range of cultural and social contexts:

- Teaching and learning are ‘horizontal’, not ‘vertical’ activities, implying that
- workshop leaders/writers/directors are there to learn WITH the participants, and not as the fount of all knowledge and wisdom.
- The company dislikes the terms ‘teacher’ or ‘trainer’, preferring instead the principle of ‘guiding from within’.

The practice relates to Boal’s concept of ‘The Joker’, and resonates strongly with Dorothy Heathcote’s suggestion that the most effective paradigm for the teacher/student relationship is where the workshop/classroom space becomes a kind of crucible in which the job of the ‘teacher’ is to keep stirring things around. What became evident through the week was the extent to which the company’s pedagogy and practice feed into broader understandings; most notably the important perception that changing social and cultural perceptions of people from migrant backgrounds has to be tackled ‘from below’ in ways that are genuinely collaborative – as well ‘from above’ through governmental and local policy making.

The approach places considerable importance on the key skill of *listening*. It is essential to be acutely attentive to the group one is working with, sensitive to their needs; and flexible. I would go further and argue that the skill is crucial for us as drama practitioners in developing work that enables the people we are working with to find strength in each other and to find their own ways of resisting (individually and collectively) the rise of repressive ideologies –in social, institutional and political contexts. I understand the term ‘listening’ in this instance to mean something more than using one’s ears! It implies being alert and responsive to body language, facial expression, and spatial interaction between individuals and amongst the group as a whole. It also implies being acutely attentive to the way people experience repression in their own lives. Our starting point in creating strategies for resistance must involve attentive dialogue and not authoritarian prescriptions.

Esodi workshops and *The Tower of Babel* project

One of the many benefits of good drama/theatre work is that it enables participants to take on new social (as well as theatrical) roles; roles which may be quite different from those they usually play – or have been forced into. This is valuable with any group, but is especially so when working with young people who have a background of migration, and who have been labelled primarily as ‘refugees’ or ‘immigrants’. This was very evident in the Esodi workshop/rehearsal we attended.

The Esodi group varies in size. At its largest the group comprises more than 80 young people. About 60 of these were present at the rehearsal we attended. The group was remarkably diverse. Male and female, mixed ages, different nationalities. The young people we worked with came from: Italy, France, Germany, The Gambia, Nigeria, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Egypt, Tunisia, Bangladesh and Afghanistan. Added to that, *The Promised Land* group comprised people who are: English, Lithuanian (working in England), English working in France, American (working in France), Turkish, German and (of course) Italian.

We had met with and talked at some length with a few of these young people the previous day. These few were delighted to see us, genuinely pleased that we were taking an interest in their work. But, even so, to the majority of the young people there, we were strangers. Many of them have experienced deep suffering and loss, and yet for much of the time, when they are outside the safety of the theatre workshop situation, they are viewed with deep suspicion. With 15 of us watching from the side of the room, the situation was potentially highly intimidating. The warm-up activities included all of us – the young people and all *The Promised Land* group – 75 people in all. It was potentially chaotic. In reality it was wholeheartedly inclusive. The activities were simple, physically and vocally energetic: moving through space, then freezing, linking with the person nearest to you when you stopped, making eye contact, trying not to laugh, copying the movements and vocal sounds made by a ‘guide’. The decision to include us in the warm-up placed us all as equals in this secure space. I have often worked with people who have had no previous experience of theatre work (for example, young offenders, long term prisoners, military families, people with mental health problems) and when people first start working this way they often find it difficult to make eye and physical contact. In this situation – where we had never met (let alone worked with) most of these young people before – it was truly remarkable they undertook the tasks so enthusiastically and whole heartedly. That alone was a testament to the quality of work being undertaken and to their own wholehearted engagement in it.

We then moved to the side of the room and observed a rehearsal. They ran through a short extract from the play they were working on, based on *The Tower of Babel* myth. The following is a brief account:

- Through movement, they create a sense of an enormous tower, looking up at it with awe as it grows ever taller.
- They start to speak, each in their own language, but not listening to anyone else, creating a cacophony before ...
- ... the tower collapses. They fall to the floor. The image is horribly like a massacre.
- Gradually, each body comes back to life, each person discovering her/himself with curiosity and wonder.
- They 'meet' A N Other, and explore each other with a similar sense of wonder.
- One person speaks, announcing herself, 'Je suis Beatrice'... And gradually this is taken up by others, in their own languages: 'Ich bin Gerhard,' 'I am Peter,' 'Io sono Giulia,' 'Je suis Yusef'...
- People start to divide into pairs, with each person speaking a different language. These attempts to make contact, to be understood, to converse, all start from a sense of curiosity, but attempts at communication break down as frustration takes hold.
- What starts as a desire to reach out and to be heard becomes tinged with aggression.
- Fights break out. Some of these hint at brutal violence, others are remarkably sensuous. They all end in another moment of stillness. In getting to this stillness, there is a strong sense of the tensions between desire (to touch and be touched, to love and be loved) and fear of otherness.

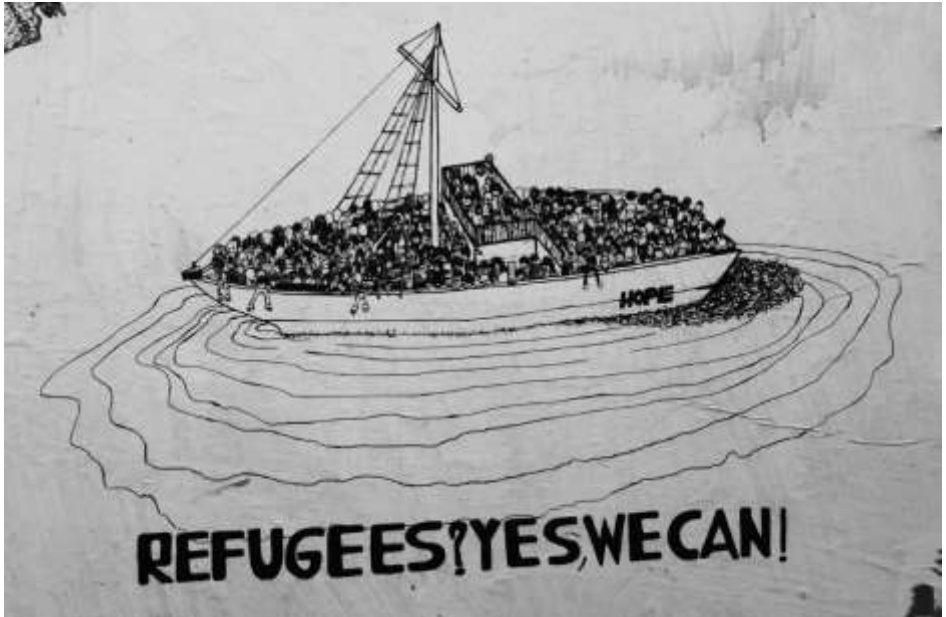
I hope this gives a sense of the range of work undertaken in such a short time, using physicality, spoken language and vocal work. That is not where the play will end, but it was as much as we could see in the time available. From there they will be using the framework of the myth to explore ways of resisting the tendency in ourselves to violence and aggression when confronted with one's own fears and the fears of others

My initial response to the rehearsal in its early stages was one of slight disappointment. If I'm really honest, I thought the content seemed slightly passé. As the rehearsal progressed, however, I realised that I had been observing what was happening as if from above, instead of trying to perceive it from within. In short, I wasn't properly attending to the participants, not really listening (with all my senses) to what was going on in the close interactions. Once I became aware of this, what I heard and what I saw was an overwhelming sense of common purpose, mutual respect and extraordinarily sensitive interactions. That was the real drama. The rehearsal itself was rigorous and demanding. Whilst the director's approach made it clear that every member of the group had a vital contribution to make, he asked for high standards, frequently reworking moments, episodes and sequences. It is often difficult to keep everyone focused even with groups much smaller than this one, but here the focus was held throughout, and was characterised by great patience and a strong sense that everyone was working together in a spirit of genuine collaboration.

The rehearsal was immediately followed by an open discussion in which the young people were invited to reflect on and talk about their responses to taking part in the workshops. Many young people spoke up. One young man said, 'Before I came here I stayed at home (meaning the reception centre where he was sleeping) and I only thought about Africa. Now I have friends and I think about this.' There was an overwhelming sense that all taking part felt that they mattered in this space, that they were valued for who they are, that they were meeting others (socially and culturally), that they were being listened to, and they were being 'met' – in every sense of that word.

What we witnessed, and were part of in that workshop, was NOT assimilation (which implies stasis on the part of the assimilating culture), but an acknowledgement of diversity and the pressures that drive us apart at the same time as being a beautiful celebration of difference, of collaboration and of humanity, and what can draw us together in the most positive of ways. It was not the kind of process drama I have been championing over the years, as theatre it was not 'original' in its forms, but it was immensely powerful – for the participants and for those of us observing. That power derived from the strength of the collaboration, the mutual respect between all in the room. And this – which paraphrases the comments and observations made by participants as they were reflecting on work at the end of the session:

Here I am working with others who are so often labelled as refugees or migrants – whether by those who would corral us in camps or would reduce us to objects of their pity – engaged in challenging and rigorous work that doesn't deny the brutality of my history, nor try to crush my cultural identity, but allows me to develop a new sense of self-worth that draws on my experiences and my friends' experiences, even as it allows me to negotiate who I am now and who I might become in this new world.



One of many examples of the rich street art found in Bologna

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WEBSITES

Border Crossings

<http://www.bordercrossings.org.uk/about-us>

Teatro dell' Argine

<http://www.teatrodellargine.org/site/lang/en-EN>

Border Crossings' summary of the Promised Land project

<http://thepromisedlandeu.blogspot.co.uk/2018/01/the-promised-land.html>

A blog about the Promised Land training week in Adana. I have drawn on some of this material in this article.

<http://thepromisedlandeu.blogspot.co.uk/2018/02/birds-bridges-and-language-by-brian.html>

The ERASMUS document, giving further information about the Promised Land project

<http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/05503860-d146-4622-88cc-332c40e2e42b>

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