

Conducting a Theatre Workshop for Syrian Refugees at Berlin's Tempelhof Center

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An Essay by Fadi Fayad Skeiker

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Thanks to Alexander Shroeder, a theatre professor and an avid theatre practitioner from Berlin, I was recently able to lead an applied theater workshop with three core members of his new theatre company, one that is formed by young refugees who are temporarily located in Berlin's Tempelhof Airport. Tempelhof, which was largely built by the Nazi government, ceased its airport operations in 2008 and has now become a refugee center with a plan to house up to seven thousand refugees, which makes it one of the biggest, if not the biggest, refugee centers in Germany. The three members of Shroeder's company were asylum seekers from Syria---Abed, 17, from Deir al-Zour; Mohamad, 16, from Marj al-Sultan; and Odai, 17, a Palestinian who was born and raised in Syria.

Alexander's work with these three youths as well as others began in late winter 2016, when he worked with them and the assistance of Raghda, a translator, using theatre as a tool to address their issues, their lives, their escape to Germany, and their dreams. To them, Alexander is more than a theatre facilitator; he is a mentor, a big brother, and a bridge between them and the German community.

On our first day, one of them, Mohammed, told me his story. He made several attempts to journey from Turkey to Greece on a floating boat, being stopped by the coast guard twice before finally succeeding and walking the rest of the way to Germany. Abed was luckier, arriving in Greece after only one attempt. Odai was detained and tortured in Syria before he decided to run away. Alexander then joined us, accompanied by three Germans who were curious to meet and support these three youths. I felt that it would not be comfortable to conduct a workshop with three participants and four observers, so I decided to include everyone in the room in the workshop, including Raghda, the translator. The Germans took off their shoes and we all stood in a circle.

I began by asking everyone in the circle to breathe, to hum, and to make small movements, establishing a basic human connection. I then put on music and asked each of the refugees to re-live and re-embody fractions of their memories. They saw images of their homes in Syria. At this point, I felt that they were ready to go deeper and asked them to imagine that the hall we were in was a boat that they must struggle to keep in balance. They felt like they were in the middle of the sea, on a boat about to capsize, and coastal guards were within sight but offering no. They began to call out, "Help me! Help me!"

During my extensive work with refugees in similar workshops, I began to see a pattern for most of the

boat stories that I heard: refugees find their way to Turkey; they contact a smuggler; they are housed somewhere close to the sea; and they make “muhawalah,” an attempt, to cross the sea to Greece. If they are lucky, they arrive in Greece on their first attempt. If not, they are caught and returned to Turkey, and try again, repeatedly, until they reach Greece. While they wait close to the sea, they live in small, cramped apartments, which they might share with up to ten people. Until they get a call from the smuggler to go to the sea, they are not allowed to leave the apartment for two reasons: (1) the Turkish police might suspect that they are potential asylum seekers—the Turkish police have actually invaded some of these apartments—and (2) these souls are actually on alert, meaning that at any minute—it might be 2:00 a.m. or 3:00 a.m.— the smuggler might announce that the car has arrived and that they need to move immediately. At the coast, one struggle ends and a new one begins. They must wait, sometimes for hours, maybe days, until they get a green light from the smuggler to get on the boat. They lack food, water, and hygiene facilities. The boat, which is supposed to be the most dangerous part of their trip, is to them a salvation—they anxiously wait the notification to go on board. The media has been selective and providing us with only one part of the story, the boat story, while ignoring the traumatic events experienced on the journey to the boat. Perhaps this is because the boat story is more sensational since it contains potential drowning and death, much more sensational than covering people crammed into a small apartment awaiting a signal from a smuggler.

If they successfully complete the boat crossing and the epic journey through Europe to Germany or another place of refuge, they are placed under a different kind of stress. Crammed into a refugee center, they wait for weeks, months, perhaps even years, for the paperwork allowing them to move forward. A reasonable percentage of those asylum seekers hold university degrees, are laborers, and others who are eager to become active participants of their host community. Instead, they have to wait with no end in sight. While they are waiting, they pass the time with activities such as the one Alexander is doing voluntarily; in his case, creating theatre classes, and maybe a theatre company.



Photo by Daniel Hinojo

Back in Tempelhof, I use theatre games to help them to capture and deal with their harrowing experiences. They create frozen images concerning injury, departure, and eventually hope. Here the asylum seekers struggling for relief and the Germans trying to express their sympathy and eagerness to

help.



Photo by Daniel Hinojo

At the end of the workshop, I asked where they wanted to go from here: Mohamad wanted to be a pilot, Odai a policeman, and Abed an actor. It was amazing to see how easy it was for them to articulate their dreams, since they seemed to feel that their dreams could now be achieved. As they put it, “You learn the language, you go to college, and you do what you want. Yes, the situation in the camp is hard, but it is a phase; yes, learning a new language is hard, but we will succeed; yes, we face people who do not want us to be here, but our dreams are wide open and when people see us achieving what we want, they will change their attitudes toward us.”

In their eyes, I saw determination, hope, and resilience. Changing the course of their lives was not easy, is not easy, and will not be easy, but it all begins with visualizing, imagining, and articulating their dreams, and for these young refugees, the workshop offered a way to begin that process.

(This essay, in slightly different form, first appeared in *South Writ Large*, Spring, 1916)

Fadi Fayad Skeiker is an associate professor of theater arts at the University of Jordan, and currently a visiting researcher at Free University of Berlin with support of an Erasmus grant. His work has been focusing on using applied theater as a tool to address human rights issues, refugees issues, and youth. His work has taken place in the United States, Jordan, Egypt, Portugal, Canada, and Germany.



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Table of Contents

Essays

- The Development of Diegetic Practices in Iranian Indigenous Performances: a Historical View by Mohammad J. Yousefian Kenari and Parastoo Mohebbi
- Ab?-l-?II? al-Sal?m?n?: the Rewriting of History in Egyptian Theatre by Tiran Manucharyan
- The Interwoven History of Moroccan Theatre by Jaouad Radouani
- Heather Raffo on *Noura* by Heather Denyer
- The Third Identity: An Interview with Tareq Abu Kwaik by George Potter
- Chasing the Gaze of the Killer: Rabih Mroué's *The Pixelated Revolution* by Mara Valderrama
- Conducting a Theatre Workshop for Syrian Refugees at Berlin's Tempelhof Center by Fadi Fayad Skeiker
- *The Village of Tishreen* by Ahmad Mahfouz

Announcements

- Tangier International Conference for 2016, “The Narrative Turn in Contemporary Theatre,” by Marvin Carlson

Reviews

- Mohammad al Attar’s *While I was Waiting* at Avignon by Philippa Wehle
- World Premiere of Arabic Drama at Cornell by Marvin Carlson\
- Cairo in the ‘60’s: Review of *This Time* by the Rising Circle Theater Collective New York City, May 19, 2016 by Michael Malek Najjar

Short Plays

- *A Crime on Restaurant Street* by Wajdi al-Adal, Trans. Katherine Hennessy
- *Firestarter* by Hassan Abdulrazzak
- *Before Dinner* by Yasser Abu Shaqra, Trans. by Faisal Hamadah

www.arabstages.org

arabstages@gc.cuny.edu

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