

## Book Review

*Refugee Performance: Practical Encounters*, edited by Michael Balfour  
(Bristol: Intellect , 2013)

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'Refugee performance' is a wide and unwieldy category, partly because it brings together two terms and fields that are themselves contested and complex. In its narrowest sense, the term 'refugee' refers to: '[a] person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (UNHCR 2010: 14). However, the field of refugee studies has sought to broaden this definition, firstly by tracing the history and genealogy of the definition itself, secondly by testing the boundaries of the so-called 'five grounds' for protection ('membership of a particular social group' is perhaps the most elastic), and thirdly by pointing to those subjects who find themselves in danger yet ineligible for protection. Thus in a broader sense, the term 'refugee' and its associated academic discourse also include asylum seekers, (internally) displaced persons, stateless persons, returnees, and forced migrants more generally.

Similarly, as contemporary humanities scholars are aware, when it comes to 'performance,' the field of performance studies has not only broadened such a term, it has also refined it by distinguishing between several different registers or genres of performance (including 'social performance', 'cultural performance', etc). Hence 'refugee performance' takes in everything from the social interactions that occur in the UNHCR office to the cultural dances that are performed in refugee camps and communities as well as the aesthetic performances staged for prestigious arts festivals. Some of these performances are private and others public, some are planned and others spontaneous, some are about resistance and others compliance. Nevertheless, they can all be considered refugee or 'refugee-related' performance (19).

The book *Refugee Performance: Practical Encounters*, edited by Michael Balfour, manages to capture all of this complexity and much more. Balfour has assembled an impressive array of voices, places, case studies, and disciplines in order to examine performances made by, with and for refugees. Of the voices, some will be familiar to theatre and performance studies scholars, including Balfour himself as well as Tom Burvill, Dwight Conquergood, Rea Dennis, Laura Edmondson, Rand Hazou, Alison Jeffers and Yuko Kurahashi. Others voices, however, will be less familiar, for instance psychologists and psychiatrists Yvonne Slied, Kaethe Weingarten, and Andrew Gilbert as well as anthropologist Felicia Faye McMahon, lawyer Rob Lachowicz and his co-author theatre practitioner and educator Sarah Woodland. This interdisciplinary approach is complemented by an international one, with authors writing from and about Thailand, Palestine, Iraq, Uganda, Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia, the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. It sounds overwhelming, and at 17 chapters it almost is, but Balfour makes this mass of material

manageable by structuring it according to the approximate chronology of a refugee's journey, from camp to resettlement to citizenship.

Before we get to the camp, though, we first encounter a preface, a personal reflection, and an introduction. The personal reflection, by Niz Jabour, is both poetic and thought provoking, especially his meditation on the 'multiplicity of exiles' he has experienced when migrating from Iraq to Australia via Pakistan and, more recently, when visiting Iraq again after almost two decades in exile (13). In this way, the volume foregrounds the voice of a man who is both a (former) refugee and an artist, though the superfluous preface that precedes it almost brings the gesture undone. In contrast, Balfour and Nina Woodrow's introduction to refugee studies and its relation to performance is essential. The chapter carefully maps the many paradoxes of refugee life and literature: for instance, that camps are supposed to be sanctuaries but often become sites of violence and/or major medical, environmental and social problems (22). Similarly, the literature on resettlement suggests that, on the one hand, refugees are more likely than other migrants to suffer from trauma, whether that manifests as an official medical diagnosis or as a more diffuse, but nonetheless acutely felt, set of social, financial and emotional effects. On the other hand, their very survival indicates that they are both resourceful and resilient (35). It is a paradox that repeats itself throughout the book.

The second section—on performance and refugee camps—dominates the book, with its eight chapters. The first and most famous is Dwight Conquergood's seminal 'Health Theatre in a Hmong Refugee Camp.' First published in 1998, this chapter provides a detailed and vivid account of the fieldwork he conducted in Camp Ban Vinai in the mid-1980s. Located in Thailand, and populated by Hmong, the camp lacked housing, water and proper sewerage, but apparently abounded in cultural performance such as singing, storytelling, ritual chanting, lamentations and animal sacrifices (38). Combining the roles of ethnographer, health worker and performance practitioner, Conquergood worked with refugees to co-devise a piece of popular theatre with the aim of improving living conditions in the camp. Too late, Conquergood realises that he has succumbed to the bureaucratic logic of the camp, which casts its residents as ignorant and dirty and its workers as educated and clean (50-56). In fact, he argues, 'the expatriate health professionals ... needed to develop a critical awareness about health problems in the camp at least as much as did the Hmong' (54). In this way, the chapter is self-reflexive without being self-conscious; it combines ethnography, applied, community and popular theatre as well as rhetorical analysis. It deserves its place at the front of the book and the foundation of the field.

While Conquergood writes about a camp in Thailand in the 1980s, three chapters consider the situation in northern Uganda in the mid-2000s. In 2003, Yvonne Sliep was working in refugee camp as a psychologist. Her workshops combined psychology's 'narrative therapy' with performance's 'forum theatre,' leading her local collaborators to name the practice 'narrative theatre' (82). While it sounds worryingly close to some of the most problematic models of testimonial theatre, which can sometimes retraumatise refugees, narrative theatre redeems itself through its focus on strength. Sliep, Weingarten, and Gilbert argue that 'refugees often have rich stories of courage' and that retelling these stories can 'bring them back in touch' with that courage (90-91). What one does with this courage, however, is less clear as we do not know how the health workers who Sliep was working with and the refugees they in turn were working with fared in the medium- to long-term.

One year after Sliep conducted her fieldwork, Karen Edmondson was also in Uganda working at a rehabilitation centre for former abductees. Edmondson considers a complex constellation of performances, which I summarise here as the performance of violence, assistance, and resistance.

For the most part, Edmondson focuses on the way in which non-government organisations perform assistance, which is to say they not only provide aid but also ensure that they are seen to be doing so (102). Edmondson argues that the centre procures its visibility – and therefore its funding – through the problematic appropriation of therapeutic practices. She details several instances where the children’s private creative practices (drawing, singing, dancing) are displayed or restaged in public, seemingly without permission or negotiation (102–06). Nevertheless, she also perceives moments of resistance, such as when the children practice outside the designated time slot or perform with bracelets they are not supposed to wear (112–16). First published in 2005, the chapter concludes with a post-script, in which Edmondson analyses her own performance as a scholar. Intriguingly, Edmondson now sees her choice to focus on former abductees as part of a wider cultural fetishisation of the figure of the child soldier and notes that it precluded her from seeing the suffering of other Ugandan youth (117–18). The essay is rich, detailed and nuanced and all the more fascinating for its revision.

The other chapter which deals with northern Uganda is an extract of a play Edmondson devised in collaboration with Ugandan performer, playwright and musician Okello Kelo Sam and Tanzanian musician and dancer Robert Ajwang’. *Forged in Fire* is a solo performance in which Okello plays himself telling the story of his brother who was abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army, a Rebel Commander who befriends one of the children in his unit, and the Tour Guide who provides ironic commentary on proceedings. It joins Afshin Nikosouresht’s *There is Nothing Here* (2002), Shahin Shafaei’s *Refugitive* (2003), Towfiq Al Qady’s *Nothing But Nothing* (2005), Ery Nzaramba’s *Split/Mixed* (2013) and others, in the growing subgenre of solo refugee performance.

There are also three essays about the performances that emerged from the former Yugoslavia. From Croatia, Sanja Nikčević considers the work of Lydia Scheuermann Hodak, who is well known for her novels but not her plays. Nikčević argues this neglect is not accidental but wilful and that her plays, particularly *Maria’s Pictures* (1995), are too emotional, too direct and too politically complex for Croatian theatre culture. Consequently, although the play has been translated and performed in Austria, Germany and Iran, among other places, it has only been performed once in Croatia. Nikčević’s brief chapter sits alongside Guglielmo Schininà’s longer account of his psychosocial and theatrical work with Serbian refugees. In fact, there is very little theatre per se, though there is plenty of cultural performance, as Conquergood observes of Camp Ban Vinai. Like Conquergood, Schininà understands theatre less as a form and more ‘as a means of developing relationships, communication and expression that concentrates on the construction of roles’ (182). He contests several pieces of conventional wisdom about what constitutes best practice in refugee performance, including the dictum that facilitators should consult with refugees about what they want to do (the group he was working with could not cope with choices as they had never really had any) and that workshops should begin with group exercises (he argues that his participants were already over-invested in their group identity, which was both a cause and a consequence of the war) (175; 170). With this in mind, he and his co-workers often had to split participants into smaller groups to do suggested activities such as sewing, sport and music. The final chapter in this section is an extract from Bosnian writer Zlatko Topčić’s play *Refugees*. The play’s dialogue is dense, allusive and surprisingly amusing in parts.

Even as the camps in South East Asia and Eastern Europe have been established and dismantled, the camps in Palestine have endured. Rand Hazou’s visit to the Aida refugee camp is framed by two homecomings: one bitter, the other bittersweet. In the opening scene, Hazou—whose father and grandfather were both born in Palestine—takes the bus from East Jerusalem to Bethlehem. While his grandfather used to travel the nine kilometres fairly easily, Hazou’s trip takes more than 90 minutes as the bus wends its way around the separation barrier and through the hills, villages

and checkpoints. What should feel like a homecoming instead feels like he has 'been issued with a visitor's pass for a temporary inspection of a large prison' (131). By contrast, the second scene takes place when Hazou is sitting in a theatre, waiting for a performance by Alrowwad Theatre to start. It is here, funnily enough, that Hazou suddenly feels a strong sense of home—'a strange revelation given that for all the other people who surround me, the inhabitants who live there, the camp is a constant reminder of homes left behind' (150). There is already some Anglophone literature on Alrowwad and its theory and practice of 'beautiful resistance' (Thompson et al. 2008: 56–65), as Hazou notes, but his own relationship to Palestine adds another layer to this chapter.

The second section of *Refugee Performance* turns from camps to countries of resettlement, including the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia. This section is anchored by Tom Burvill's chapter, which compares and contrasts four performances that were produced in Australia in the four years from 2002 to 2005. These include Sidetrack Performance Group's *Citizen X: Letters from Refugees* (2002), which is a collage of anonymised correspondence from asylum seekers held in detention centres, *Refugitive* (2004), a solo performance by Iranian refugee and theatre practitioner Shahin Shafaei, version 1.0's *CMI: A Certain Maritime Incident*, a tribunal play based on the transcripts of senate inquiry into the 'children overboard' affair, and Hannie Rayson's fictional drama, *Two Brothers* (2005). Burvill does not argue for one form over the other, rather he suggests that each facilitates a slightly different ethical encounter with the 'other.' First published in the special issue on 'Performance and Asylum' of *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* (Gilbert and Nield 2008), the essay is one of the most cited to emerge from the issue, indeed the era, and its republication here testifies to its elegance and endurance.

One of the few forms of documentary theatre missing from Burvill's survey is the oral history or testimonial play, typically produced when a playwright records interviews with refugees and then crafts a script from this material. This is where Balfour's chapter starts, with a performance devised in consultation with members of the Burundian and Ethiopian communities. This show was performed three times for three different refugee communities, which enabled the show to sidestep some of the problems that emerge with refugees performance for non-refugee audiences, but also frustrated the performers who wanted to share their efforts further (218). While the project seems successful, Balfour still harbours doubts about it and so turns to two other models of refugee performance, both of which emerged under the auspices of the Exodus project (2005-06) in Margate, United Kingdom. In Wendy Ewald's *Promised Land*, the photographer collaborated with young migrants to take their portrait in a place of their choosing as well as a picture of their most precious possessions. These images were then displayed in various places around town (the seawall, the library, the fish-and-chip shop) and bound together by an audio walk, which audiences downloaded and listened to as they strolled around town. In contrast, Anthony Gormley's *Waste Man* eschewed audio in favour of the visual, specifically spectacle. Residents of Margate, refugees and non-refugees alike, were invited to deposit their domestic detritus in a wasteland that had once been a funfair. Six weeks and 30 tonnes later, Gormley had crafted an enormous sculpture that was then set on fire. Like Burvill, Balfour sees problems and possibilities with each form, suggesting that no single model can ever do justice to the complexity of the refugee experience and that as a result, a combination of genres and styles will always be needed.

The last two chapters in the section deal with performances from the United States. Felicia Faye McMahon's chapter details her work with a small group of so-called 'Lost Boys' from Sudan (an interesting choice given Edmondson's earlier comments). More specifically, she analyses how they have adapted their traditional dances since arriving in North America. In the absence of parents and elders, these young DiDinga men have accidentally misremembered some songs (237, 240) and

deliberately changed others, for instance by disregarding the social rules around who can sing which part (243). In other instances, the shift has come about partly through being in a new place and partly through performing for new audiences, for example a song about being a warrior becomes more about being a survivor when sung for a North American audience (238). More than anything else, however, what has reshaped their traditions is their youthful sense of play: they tease, mock and imitate each other as well as their absent elders (243). Through play, they also preserve. Beyond its 'thick description,' McMahon's essay is also interesting for what it reveals about the limits of interdisciplinary work. When she writes about watching DiDinga dance in its 'original context' via a video (233), as a performance studies scholar I could not help but interrogate the notion of the 'original' as well as the role of the documentation.

In contrast, Yuko Kurahashi's chapter on Ping Chong's performance *Children of War* (2002) clearly belongs to theatre studies. Part of Ping Chong's long-running series *Undesirable Elements* (1992-), *Children of War* is another "community-based oral history" play, this time devised in collaboration with five teenage refugees from Somalia, Sierra Leone, El Salvador, Afghanistan and Kurdistan (250). There are some fascinating details here, including how the play was cast (often a problematic process in refugee performance) and how it was performed (more like a staged reading than a fully-fledged production, again a common choice) (251). However, the chapter does not engage with any of the literature that has amassed around this form, specifically on the problem of casting refugees as themselves and/or of reproducing their testimonies on stage. To be fair, some of this work emerged after Kurahashi first published this article in 2004 (see Dennis 2007, republished in this volume; Gilbert and Lo 2007: 191–97; Jeffers 2008, 2012; Wake 2013) but other work was available well before this and yet is still absent (see Raphael 1999; Salverson 1994, 1996, 1997, 1999, 2001). Unfortunately, this meant that I took Kurahashi's praise for *Children of War* less seriously than I otherwise might have.

The mention of Rea Dennis brings me to the final section, which deals with the issue of performance and citizenship. Identifying herself as an 'artist and citizen,' Dennis provides a detailed account of conducting a playback theatre performance for an audience of refugees, refugee caseworkers, and other Australian citizens (281). She argues that playback theatre is premised on the assumption that telling stories can 'liberate ... disenfranchised voice[s]' and facilitate a form of 'inclusive democracy' (282). However, this assumption does not hold when working with refugees, who have often already told their stories numerous times in order to 'move along the continuum from refugee to resident' (286). For this reason, the value of playback theatre is at best ambiguous and at worst reproduces the power relations of those other settings in which refugees have told their stories (286–87). There are similar complications in Sarah Woodland and Rob Lachowicz's chapter, which details their work devising a performance to prepare refugees for citizenship tests. If that were not complicated enough, the project was funded by the government and auspiced by a community legal centre, meaning that Woodland and Lachowicz were effectively trying to deliver a 'bottom-up emancipatory and participatory projec[t] within the constraints of [a] top-down government funding guidelines and social policy' (268). Here again, is another paradox in refugee performance: that of resistance and compliance.

In the final essay, and one of the few unpublished ones, Alison Jeffers reflects on the relative lack of literature on the audiences of refugee performance (299). Like Balfour and Woodrow, Jeffers identifies a persistent paradox, arguing that audiences 'are presumed to fall into two broad camps: one, an audience that is ignorant about refugees and needs to be educated, and the other, and audience that is knowledgeable about "refugee issues" and is therefore said to be "converted"' (301). When attending a performance by an African Caribbean dance group based in Manchester, Jeffers is irritated to find herself addressed as a member of the former when she identifies as part of

the latter (306). In reflecting on her response, Jeffers suggests that it does not matter how much we do or do not know about refugees, since both audiences are capable of shutting down an exchange—either on the basis that they don't want to hear or that they've heard it all before. Instead, what matters is how receptive we are both to refugees and to our fellow audience members. Jeffers argues that the 'shoulder-to-shoulder' relations between spectators are just as important as the more routinely theorised 'face-to-face' encounters between actors and spectators (306-07). Together, these spatial and social arrangements facilitate what Jeffers call 'civil listening,' a mode of reception that indicates 'an interest in refugee stories and [a] commitment to dialogue' without producing false 'feelings of togetherness' (308). In this way, Jeffers demonstrates that the 'listening turn,' as it has been called in media and cultural studies, holds much promise for refugee performance (O'Donnell et al. 2009).

Reading across all three sections, several themes emerge: the ongoing ambivalence about the role of testimonial theatres; the emergent and increasingly important shift from trauma to resilience; and the turn to reception, specifically to listening. However, I was also intrigued by what did *not* emerge, namely images and revisions. While *Refugee Performance* includes some images, there are not as many as one might expect based on the original articles. For example, in Conquergood's *TDR* article there are 28 extraordinary images of Camp Ban Vinai, its residents and the character Mother Clean. Here, however, there are none. Similarly, Schininà's *TDR* article has nine images and five diagrams, but only the latter appear here. Balfour's chapter has the same number of photographs (seven) but a different format: small black and white images as opposed to the larger colour ones that appeared in the *Journal of Arts and Communities*. Meanwhile McMahan has cut all three images of the Lost Boys and Kurahashi has cut all four images of the *Children of War*. Of course, most readers will not notice this relative lack of images and even those that do might see it simply as a matter of copyright and cost, which of course it is. However, it also seems indicative of an increasing awareness that while performance overlaps with and underpins visual culture, it only rarely undermines it. If we are going to criticise certain media and theatre genres for representing refugees as silent spectacles of themselves, or worse as spectacles of violence and victimhood, then we need to pay careful attention to which images we reproduce, where and why. Perhaps what is disappointing then is not the lack of images, but rather the lack of reflection on this fact.

This lack of discussion is partly due to the minimal nature of the revisions made here. Not that the chapters need revising, since most were published in peer-reviewed journals, but in view of the insights Edmondson's post-script produced it seems like a lost opportunity. What, for instance, does Burvill think of those Australian performances, a decade later and with even harsher policies in place? Where are the DiDinga dancers now? Beyond my own curiosity, this points to a striking lack of longitudinal data in the field. Few, if any, scholars seem to have followed up with participants or at least they have not yet published their results. This is true not only of refugee performance but also of what Carol Martin calls 'theatre of the real' more generally (2012). What do participants make of their experience two, five or ten years later? Does telling one's story, or having one's story told, on stage have long-term effects on refugees' lives? The existing literature indicates that in the short-term some refugees feel violated and others feel validated, but there is little long-term data to confirm, complicate or refute this account.

In summary, *Refugee Performance: Practical Encounters* will serve as an excellent introduction to the field for both undergraduates and postgraduates as well as those scholars who are arriving from elsewhere. For those who are already working in the field, some essays will be familiar but others will not and between the chapters that one might have missed the first time around as well as the chapters that are being published for the first time here, there is plenty of material through

which to think. The discourse on performance made by, with, for, and about refugees has expanded rapidly over the past two decades and a period of consolidation is perhaps overdue. Certainly an edited collection was and as a leader in the field, Balfour was the person to do it. The task now, as always, is to pursue our scholarship with the same resolve and resilience as refugees themselves.<sup>1</sup>

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