

Welcome to *The Jungle*: Performing Borders and Belonging in Contemporary British Migration Theatre¹

EMMA WELTON

This article explores the political and ethical implications of performance representing the ongoing realities of migration in contemporary Britain. Using Good Chance Theatre's The Jungle (2018) as its point of departure, the article problematizes the use of dramaturgies of proximity to confect simplistic notions of empathy as tantamount to political change. In a Brechtian vein, the article argues for modes of distanciation to foster critical engagement among audiences at the site of contemporary performance on migration. Focusing upon the production's West End transfer, its use of immersive strategies and its use of a comedic model to address ongoing issues in migration, this article finds that such strategies are not as politically transgressive as marketing and critical reception often contend them to be, with the onus of responsibility placed solely upon the individual spectator.

Since the mid-2010s, the right-wing British press and successive governments have formed a sinister kinship with one another in their actions on immigration, representing the movement of displaced refugees and migrants as a perpetual 'crisis'. Restrictive legislation crafted and passed in Westminster impedes the possibility for many to claim asylum safely at the UK border in Calais.² This, however, does not stop attempts at movement being made; at the south-eastern corner of the UK, makeshift boats intermittently cast themselves away from neighbouring France, with passengers aboard buoyed only by held breath. If the water does not impede their course, the British border force will. Towed as criminals to dry land, headlines continuously mould individuals into an unknown mass, their particular histories of exile overlooked in favour of black and white, land and sea, us and them. The Home Office continues this unforgiving cycle, buying out jumbo jets, sending people back to places they have fled, places where they cannot live safely as they are.

The hostile infrastructure of the UK's border has led to many within the British cultural sector seeking to represent the antagonism of the British immigration system artistically. Theatrical institutions in particular have embarked upon nuanced representations of migration and exile, to proactively support immigrant communities. The emergence of the Theatres of Sanctuary programme commends institutions and companies who work with and provide artistic opportunities for migrant communities. At the temporal intersection of the so-called migrant 'crisis'

and the fallout from the Brexit referendum in 2016, there emerged a spate of new work exploring the theme, from individual performances to entire seasons curated within institutions.³ The work of one organization in particular has dominated critical conversation surrounding theatrical representations of migration and exile.

Good Chance Theatre is a company-turned-charity, responsible for many artistic ventures with and about migrants. Beginning at the Calais 'Jungle' refugee camp in 2015 (where the two artistic directors, Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, volunteered), Good Chance have since expanded their work to other neighbourhoods in France, the UK and Greece, and along the US–Mexico border, hoping to bring awareness to the issues which migrants and refugees face through participatory artistic practices. Good Chance embark upon this primarily through the construction of geodesic domes, functioning as temporary arenas for artistic expression. But it is with their play *The Jungle*, which dramatizes events at the Calais refugee camp, that the company has received 'universal critical acclaim.'⁴ Examining the promotional and reception materials to *The Jungle*, reveals frequent refrains in the critical discourse that insist that the play 'humanizes' refugees, that its West End transfer is crucial in opening up this story to a multiplicity of people, that its use of humour was a welcome surprise and that the play's immersive strategies are fundamental to the telling of this story.⁵

These materials suggest that by being close to, and bearing witness to, the staging of this history, an empathetic response is the desired outcome, and may *do* something to redress the hostilities of British immigration highlighted in this production. *The Jungle* constructs various dramaturgies of proximity meticulously, to bring spectators closer to migrant stories. These strategies, however, risk spectatorial stasis: the audience brought so intimately into the reconstruction of the Calais camp, their emotions so implicated in the trajectories of individual characters surrounding them in the immersive staging, that their critical engagement with the broader structural issues which the play illuminates fades away in the distance. Given the context of migrants and refugees continuing to face violence at the hands of the same system dramatized in *The Jungle*, how can empathy alone be enough to confront the reality of what has been staged?

Before we proceed, I wish to make it plain that as a spectator to *The Jungle* in 2018, I was deeply moved by the production.⁶ In the time which has since elapsed, however, I have grown sceptical of the over-reliance upon the spectator's ability to engage empathetically as evidence of a significant political intervention. Indeed, as Lauren Berlant reminds us, 'In operation, compassion is a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is *over there*.'⁷ This illustrates the knotty paradox at work in *The Jungle*'s particular dramaturgies of proximity: though the play sought to bring the issues of migration and exile 'close to home', this closeness manufactures empathy as a politically subversive force in and of itself. This minimizes the importance of audience members making political demands in the context of the ongoing struggles faced by migrants in the UK and at the border, and this decentres migrant and refugee subjects from their own stories, placing them at a remove.

This article proposes that staging ongoing issues of migration may be best served by the use of Brechtian modalities of distanciation, critically engaging audiences to be

politically aware, politically active and mindful of the limits of empathy. Guided by performance, critical-race and affective theories, I probe the ethical and political implications of staging ongoing issues in migration, with particular focus upon the stasis inherent in certain dramaturgies of proximity used to foster empathy. With *The Jungle* as my point of departure, I will first analyse the virtues and limitations of staging theatre pertaining to ongoing issues in migration on the West End. Focusing specifically upon the play's transfer to the Playhouse Theatre from the Young Vic, I offer evidence of my own spectatorial experience of the show, and analyse what it means to situate a play concerned with ongoing issues in migration within the lineage of the West End, querying the extent to which it was an affront to the industry and the neighbourhood in which it was performed, as the media appeared to contend.⁸ I will then move on to examine the popularity of immersive strategies in migration theatre, and in conversation with Sara Ahmed's theory of 'multicultural love', consider what these strategies do to confect a problematic ethos of multicultural belonging.⁹ Finally, I critically assess the use of humour in contemporary work on migration. I focus upon the use of humour in a Brechtian modality, to foster a critical distance in the audience through *Verfremdungseffekt*, in particular when these comedic moments are immediately followed by moments sought to evoke empathy, a faculty which much contemporary work on migration appears eager to leave audiences with.

An ongoing crisis on the West End

The Jungle began its theatrical life at the Young Vic in 2017, before transferring to the West End's Playhouse Theatre in 2018 as a co-production between the Young Vic, National Theatre and Good Chance. It has since enjoyed transnational success, journeying to San Francisco and New York in 2019–20. *The Jungle*, the playtext prefaces, is a 'fictional account inspired by the writers' [Joes Murphy and Robertson] work in the Jungle'.¹⁰ Audiences sit at tables or on the floor of the reimaged 'Afghan Café', a restaurant which once existed at the site in Calais, immersed in the action of the play. At the Playhouse Theatre, however, an additional perspective was added. The production chose to retain the traditional dress circle of the theatre, renaming it the 'Cliffs of Dover'. The audience in the Cliffs sat at a critical distance, looking down over the performance, and at the interplay between the other audience and performers below (see Fig. 1). The character Safi, a refugee from Syria, is our narrator. He guides us, navigating the tensions building between refugees from different countries and British volunteers, the violently hands-on French police and the negligently hands-off British state. He also routinely breaks the fourth wall, confronting the audience directly regarding their own responsibilities in bearing witness.

Whilst the play stages many scenes of the border's violence brutally, it also chooses to stylize many scenes within a comedic register. The terrible gymnastics of attempted border crossings are made into a game between teenagers in the camp; mistranslations are often exaggerated for comedic effect; and British volunteer Boxer is fashioned into a 'comedic migrant', allowing him to directly criticize the British government through satirical song.¹¹ As the play ends, it does so with Safi relaying



FIG. 1 Mohammed (Jonathan Nyati) and Salar (Ben Turner) celebrate, surrounded by audience members in the Afghan Café seating, whilst audience members in the ‘Cliffs of Dover’ circle seating look down from above. National Theatre Archive, photograph by Marc Brenner.

that the camp has been destroyed by French forces; that children have disappeared; and that he, having reached the UK at last, is kept in a state of precarity by the Home Office, with administrative errors delaying the outcome of his asylum application.

To understand the rigid cultural imaginary surrounding what allegedly ‘belongs’ on the West End – and how *The Jungle* both cast itself and became cast as a misfit in this environment – we may first turn to a review of *The Jungle* in the political and cultural magazine the *New Statesman*. In a review-cum-profile of *The Jungle*’s West End mega-producer Sonia Friedman, Paul Mason observes,

Take a stroll along Shaftesbury Avenue and you’ll find Michael Jackson’s *Thriller Live*, *Imperium* – a shock and gore adaptation of the Robert Harris novels – the interminable *Les Mis*, the teen musical *Everybody’s Talking About Jamie*, and Friedman’s current blockbuster, *Harry Potter*. None of these shows are dire; some of them are highly relevant (*Imperium* manages to take a swipe at Trump); but none of them takes a directly political risk. I can’t recall any mainstream theatre producer attempting something so dissonant with theatreland’s idea of what sells.¹²

Mason, like other critics, situates *The Jungle* as an unorthodox ‘risk’, within perceptions of what kind of shows work within the commercial funding model of the West End.¹³ Mason here confects a presumed apoliticism of the work he cites above, setting *The Jungle* apart as politically provocative. In the context of the British theatre industry at large, the language of ‘risk’ is also a familiar metric which has been used in marketing

and cultural policy, often within a racist logic to imply that productions centring non-white subjects could not have broad audience appeal.¹⁴ Sonia Friedman articulates her ambition with the play as challenging ideas of popularity, and perceptions of belonging on the West End: 'I want *The Jungle* to be talked about alongside *Harry Potter*, *The Lion King* and *Dreamgirls*.'¹⁵ The media fervour surrounding the out-of-place-ness of this production illuminates encoded presumptions regarding which kinds of stories are entitled to a central focus in cultural representation.

As Olivia Lamont-Bishop points out, the production team may have chosen the Playhouse Theatre to exaggerate the material distinction between the story of those who struggle to belong in the nation, compared to the optics of the theatre itself, and the neighbourhood in which it resides: both connoting extreme wealth and symbolic power. 'Perhaps in the stark and uncomfortable contrast between the recreation of the camp with the West End awnings and plush foyer', Lamont-Bishop suggests, '*The Jungle* is trying to be overt in its understanding of itself as a cultural offering that embodies self-reflexivity'.¹⁶ In this way, the play could be seen as embodying a Brechtian modality of contradictions within the chain of production itself: its placement in that location, in that lineage, illuminating presumptions and structural racism within the both the media and theatre industries at large.

However, this begs the question: does showcasing this production here vest it with a political power *beyond* the level of the symbolic? Writing on Brecht, David Savran notes,

He upbraids bourgeois artists because they mistakenly imagine 'they have got hold of the apparatus which in fact has got a hold of them' and, as a result, profoundly underestimate the extent to which their own work is fashioned and in effect held hostage by the very apparatus they believe they are managing, manipulating, and even subverting.¹⁷

In this, Brecht perceived the extent of a social change which a work of art could inspire as directly relational to the framework in which it is placed, and who does the placing. Noticing how this works in the context of *The Jungle*, though the juggernauts of the theatre industry who were at the helm of the production were certainly well intended with regard to broadening audiences who could access this story, the West End as a space and industry is one still predicated upon multiple foundations of material exclusion. Though a certain number of free tickets were allocated to asylum seekers and many were priced at twenty-five pounds or less, the majority of tickets were still marketed between twenty-five and eighty pounds, which presents a very real financial barrier to many, particularly as income inequalities ever deepen in the capital.

The theatre industry at large can certainly be seen at play in gentrifying London's neighbourhoods. Whilst *The Jungle's* premiering venue the Young Vic has taken some kind of responsibility for the ways in which it, as a prestigious cultural venue, is implicated in the gentrification of its neighbourhood (Southwark), the same cannot be said for the West End. The Young Vic has over the course of many years developed its outreach strategies, inviting many white and non-white working-class communities affected by gentrification into the theatre's activities, offering free or

low-cost tickets.¹⁸ West End theatres, by comparison, have chosen time and again not to engage in wider access schemes in an enduring, community-building way. This implicates the extent to which work which is placed there can ever reasonably be seen as providing a sustained, proactive political provocation – if many potential audiences are restricted from the start.

If the play's subversive power is situated in momentarily diversifying the conversation of who is on the West End, surely this articulates the play's subversiveness being above all *for* the industry. As the context of this particular story is ongoing – people still struggle and die crossing the border to the UK, the media and government still frame immigrants' lives as unworthy of material investment – I argue that situating this piece of work within this neighbourhood and lineage of the West End is more contentious for the theatre-makers themselves than for the broader issue being represented. I contend that it is not enough to assign political power to a piece of work because it has finally been invited into the room, into the theatre, into the neighbourhood, when that neighbourhood at large is incredibly implicated in material acts of exclusion and in the maintenance of a cultural, political hierarchy which often ostracizes those whom this allegedly politically provocative work is about – the poor, the displaced, black and brown people.

Further examining audience responses to *The Jungle* casts doubt upon how politically subversive empathy alone can be, particularly when immersive dramaturgies are employed, drawing spectators into emotional identification with individual characters, at the expense of broader systemic critique.

Immersive strategies and confecting closeness

'You are with the characters every step of the way, you truly are inside the Afghan cafe thanks to the amazing set'.¹⁹ So reads one audience review of *The Jungle* via *Time Out* magazine. This is one example of many audience reviews directly crediting *The Jungle's* immersive strategies to the spectator's affinity with the characters. Others 'defy anyone who sees it not to leave changed', stating that it is 'so real I forgot I was watching a play' and that 'my humanity is shaken to the core'.²⁰

Responses such as these, from members of the audience and critics alike, suggest the emergence of *communitas* at performances of *The Jungle*. Within a context of American queer and feminist live performance, Jill Dolan understands *communitas* from Victor Turner as a term to describe the moments in a performance where audiences become affectively cohered: 'spectators' individuality becomes finely attuned to those around them, and a cohesive if fleeting feeling of belonging to the group bathes the audience'.²¹ As a spectator to *The Jungle* myself, the scenes where characters with enormously different approaches to the issues facing the camp would have conflict, but would try to muddle through it and find small successes in collaboration, made me feel as though a certain *communitas* was being evoked in the audience, that there emerged a feeling of being 'seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later'.²² In the context of representing ongoing issues in migration onstage,

moments of *communitas* have the potential to be particularly potent, politically mobilizing audiences to invest further in the issues raised beyond the live time and place.

In this particular instance, I believe there is reason to hesitate regarding the performance's alleged transformative potential, particularly when the use of immersive strategies supposedly creates an ethos of closeness. Even if audiences are spatialized to be close to one another, sensorially embroiled in the world and action of the performance (see Fig. 2), the burden placed upon the individual spectator, 'to make more, do more, feel more', as Adam Alston puts it, can lead to an intense present-tenseness for the spectator.²³ This can cause the spectator to have greater scrutiny of their own behaviours, perhaps distracting attention from their role as part of a larger whole. For Alston, immersive and participatory strategies prioritize the spectator's emotional geography, above what is being represented artistically: 'in the heady heights of immersion and participation', Alston observes, 'it is not art objects that take precedence so much as the affective consequences of an audience's own engagement'.²⁴ Though this is perhaps useful to encourage audience members to have greater self-awareness regarding their role in the theatre and their act of bearing witness, an anxiety of immediacy can emerge: *should I have acted like that? Maybe they wanted me to do something differently?* This kind of response situates the spectator in the present tense of their own emotionality, perhaps missing the opportunity to marvel or be moved by the art in a way which gestures more towards



FIG. 2 Mohammed (Jonathan Nyati) stands in the darkness amongst audience members seated in the Afghan Café. National Theatre Archive, photograph by Marc Brenner.

ideas of futurity. The envisioning of a 'better later' becomes foreclosed. Distancing which can be conducive to acting upon social change is kept at a remove.

Immersive strategies which may breed self-consciousness on the part of the spectator – concerned with their own participation in the performance, and their own emotionality – may preclude conditions of a more communal, mobilizing affect at the site of performance. *The Jungle* stages ongoing scenarios of violence at the border, in the Home Office, in the attitude of the British media. Using strategies of immersion to represent this reality is something I interpret as somewhat self-defeating. The audience being embroiled with the action of the characters so immediately, every so often being encouraged to sing, to accept food, situates them so convincingly in the world of the play that affective responses to the immediacy of this created world become prioritized over a more distanced scrutiny, a distanced scrutiny which is needed to confront the organization of political power and responsibility regarding the ongoing crisis in migration. When *The Jungle* repeatedly names the insufficiencies of the ruling government with regard to migration, but so carefully constructs a world of intimacy between the world of the play and the spectators to it, that objective critique of a broader political structure beyond the play becomes de-prioritized. The political contradictions which this play names, and which the play stages by its very existence on the West End, become muted in favour of the audience members' individual emotionality and introspection. With this lack of critical distance, the strategy of intense immersion risks confecting an environment of dark tourism for the audience in the recreation of the Calais camp.

Immersive strategies are, however, a distinctly popular way to dramatize the stories of contemporary and ongoing migration. National Theatre Wales's *Tide Whisperer* (2018) promoted itself as an immersive production, bringing audiences to beaches across the country to witness monologues on migration.²⁵ LegalAliens Theatre's production of *Closed Lands* (2020) in the immersive venue of the Vaults below Waterloo station interspersed satire, poetry and monologues with projected media footage, critiquing the media's role in fetishizing border crossings and scenes of violence in migration.²⁶ Indeed, prior to *The Jungle*, Good Chance Theatre took one of their pop-up geodesic domes to London's Somerset House, where they utilized immersive strategies to exhibit the stories of asylum seekers in the UK via BeAnotherLab's *The Machine to Be Another* (2016).²⁷ This installation allowed participants to 'swap' bodies via a VR headset with a refugee who was either in the Calais Jungle or claiming asylum in the UK. Motivating why they wanted asylum seekers and refugees to share their stories this way, Joe Murphy said,

This virtual reality experience, it's a way of increasing empathy. It's a way of actually, literally planting yourself in a different situation. All art asks you to imagine things and this experience just makes that imagining a little bit easier, and takes you a little bit further on in that process.²⁸

By bringing the participants' ocular and aural faculties as close as possible to another individual's (namely a refugee's) experience via the VR headset, Good Chance again emphasize audience proximity to the migrant subject as a necessity in fostering

empathy, to be as close to them as possible. Using immersive strategies in performance staging migration can certainly encourage participants to consider the privileges of their own mobility.

However, facilitating a temporary ‘could-have-been-me’-ness, as Sara Ahmed terms it, through immersive strategies risks de-prioritizing the necessity of robust, material action required by a politically activated populace. Relying upon empathy and momentary disorientation idealizes the feeling individual, and dematerializes the need for creative organization on a broader level, to materially change the realities for non-white migrants and refugees who face the structural racism and oppression of the British border.

Returning to Alston, he argues that immersive strategies are often marketed by companies as liberating audiences from a position of alleged passivity. In a theatrical context, this is particularly implied in relation to normative conditions of end-on spectatorship. Alston notes that this encourages audiences to model ‘productive participation’.²⁹ He identifies this as problematic insofar as this aspiration to constant productivity is constitutive of contemporary life under neo-liberalism, where the state increasingly abdicates its responsibilities of care, setting the onus of responsibility for all factors of living a life entirely upon the individual. When brought into the artistic realm, and particularly one which seeks to represent the ongoing realities of migration onstage, employing strategies which further put the onus of responsibility upon the individual spectator may regulate how they can respond. Immersive strategies become individuating, with the spectator becoming as inert in the theatrical space as they may be when they are watching the news at home – wondering what they could possibly do individually to effect change. This focus upon the active individual spectator relegates the democratic potential of being an audience, and casts the responsibilities of the state to the background once more.

The logic of empathy fostering closeness, expressed by Good Chance’s practitioners and reinforced through the audience reviews of *The Jungle*, exhibits a persuasive illustration of a humanist narrative of multiculturalism, a persistent feature of British society. Sara Ahmed articulates a notion of closeness supposedly being able to forge understanding between different racial and ethnic constituencies as an illusion that, ‘proximity would mean harmony between others and the incorporation of others into a national ideal. The narrative goes something like this: *If only we were closer we would be as one*’.³⁰ Analysing British government documents in the early 2000s, Ahmed observes that the construction of ‘multicultural love’ is put forward as a ‘national ideal’; the onus of responsibility for dissipating racial and ethnic tensions in the UK was placed on migrants and ethnic minorities as a mass to model sociality beyond their own ethnic and racial groups, to model the ethos of a multicultural society. Ahmed continues, ‘This narrative projects sameness onto “ethnic minority” communities in order to elevate the national ideal into a love for difference. Difference becomes an ideal by being represented as a form of likeness; it becomes a new consensus that binds us together’.³¹ The valorization of immersive strategies to represent stories of migration onstage risks modelling the multicultural ideal which Ahmed critiques here: that understanding is best understood through a closer

proximity, difference becoming a temporary sameness, with empathy idealized as a satisfactory conclusion for having modelled sociality in this way.

Many of the immersive strategies at play in *The Jungle* were heightened by the comedic strategies that shaped the play, confecting an ethos of belonging which sometimes felt politically productive, but simultaneously troubling. In the next section, I will situate how juxtaposing a comedic model (specifically satire) against strategies to foster empathy in the specific case of *The Jungle* complicated how humour could function to hold audiences and the government to account.

Brecht, humour and the resolution of empathy

For Brecht, ‘Humour is a feeling of distance’.³² As part of his *Verfremdungseffekt*, comedy could fulfil a transgressive function when it threatened emotional identification with characters and worlds built onstage, laughter at the ways in which the stage revealed its confected nature, leading the spectator to question the implications of not just this representation, but of ‘every imaginable orthodoxy’. Brecht, in this regard, allies with Bergson’s theory of laughter, which suggests, ‘The comic ... appeals to the intelligence, pure and simple; laughter is incompatible with emotion’.³³ Comedy as a strategy threatens emotional closeness between audience and performer. In theatre representing ongoing migration onstage, this is a possibility fraught with risk and potential.

Using a comedic model to approach issues in migration is growing in popularity. Far from anchoring comedy in racial and ethnic stereotyping (a criticism which has been levied against some of the National Theatre’s biggest shows exploring migration over the past decade), contemporary work such as Sh!t Theatre’s Edinburgh Fringe success *Drink Rum with Expats* works with a careful juxtaposition between humour and horror in migration.³⁴ Working with autobiographical material, Sh!t Theatre’s Louise Mothersole and Becca Biscuit detail a research trip to Malta. It starts out with free alcohol distributed to the audience, with jokes about different drinking cultures and observations of difference you make when abroad, and quickly descends into the more harrowing side of the culture they have come to visit, seeing how they treat migrants who come to the country in search of asylum. Critic Ava Wong Davies notes that, as a spectator, ‘The laughter bleeds into the awfulness’, with the ‘final twenty-minute torrent’ of horrendous images of violence against migrants leaving little room for laughter or simplistic empathy.³⁵ In a Canadian context, Yana Meerzon has recently discussed the use of tragic farce and melancholic immigrant tropes in Janusz Glowacki’s *Hunting Cockroaches* to evoke laughter in its audiences, so that the spectator may be able to interrogate their laughter, and query the implications of situating the comic and the melancholic so closely to one another in the condition of being an immigrant.³⁶

This blending of comedy within a stereotypical modality of pathos and trauma when it comes to migrant subjectivity being portrayed onstage can cleverly engage the audience’s critical faculties of bearing witness to ongoing issues which migrants face. Meerzon further articulates the subversive power of other stylings of comedy,

establishing the character of the ‘comedic migrant’ as a transgressive figure in performance history. Tracing the figure from a lineage of the ‘theatrical simpleton’ from Delia Montesinos, the ‘comedic migrant’ is a character distinct from the prevailing context in which the play is set – usually in a court or otherwise elite environment – and has to suppress their intelligence through witty word play. Though this character may seem to model racial and ethnic stereotypes of their own racial and ethnic identities, they are also able to reveal salient political truths which other characters, not anticipating the comedic migrant’s astuteness, cannot see.³⁷

In *The Jungle*, the figure of the ‘comedic migrant’ is vested in the character Boxer, who is stylized as ‘radically different’ particularly from the other British volunteer characters represented, by virtue of his working-class status. He is stylized within a stereotypical conception of a working-class Scouse man, often drunk and rhapsodizing about cheap beer and former Newcastle United player Kevin Keegan. Throughout the duration of *The Jungle*, he is lewd and bawdy, often flouting the social decorum carefully established by the other British volunteers’ quasi-colonial attempts to ‘organize’ the camp and its constituents. These moments – at least in the performance I attended – generated significant laughter from the spectators at the Playhouse Theatre (who, one could assume, were largely middle-class, given the price point of the tickets). Boxer reveals the politically provocative side of his character through the medium of satirical song, which we can recognize as suitably Brechtian. One illustrative moment where Boxer’s character evokes a critical distance in the audience through their laughter is when he sings about the ‘Christmas Shoebox’ charitable-giving campaign, where people donate goods in a shoebox to be sent on to someone in need. Boxer, banjo in arm, warbles the list of objects typically donated, items which seem to evoke little thought for the eventual recipient. Boxer narrates through song the child character Little Amal excitedly opening her present: ‘She rips it up and looks inside, it’s “Haddaway again!” / A packet of pantie liners and some ‘Nivea for Men’.³⁸ The comedic effect here was palpable in the audience, with smatterings of laughter in recognition and the absurdity of the ‘gifts’ that have been *so generously* given. The final stanza of Boxer’s song, however, changes tone, with a plea to the then prime minister Theresa May: ‘You call yourself a Christian you’re more a prison warder / Just imagine how you’d feel ... if this one was your daughter.’³⁹ The plea here might be to Theresa May, but it is also to the audience, as interpellated through the use of ‘you’d feel’ and ‘your daughter’. This highlights a broader tendency within the play to have the resolutions of scenes stylized within an empathetic register.

This moment in particular, I believe, is problematic in its distillation of associations of closeness and care; when Boxer asks Theresa May (and the audience) to ‘imagine how you’d feel ... if this one was your daughter’, the character situates an ethics of empathy and care within a fictionalized bloodline association to a child refugee. This, I argue, becomes another example of what Ahmed situates as ‘[d]ifference becom[ing] an ideal by being represented as a form of likeness’.⁴⁰ The production seeks out an empathetic response from the audience by situating Little Amal in a fictional familial lineage – the closeness of an imagined familial bond consecrating the political

urgency of what the play presents. Though I confess to have found this moment moving as a spectator, I still retain some aversion to what moments like this do. This moment is representative of a broader move within the play to initially employ Brechtian strategies of comedy, calling the audience to critically assess their laughter, but immediately abandoning these strategies by confecting moments of ‘resolution’ within a more ‘clean-cut’, empathetic register. This, I argue, stunts the creative, politically efficacious potential of the audience to not only critically assess their role in bearing witness to this social issue at the theatre, but in this specific example it situates familial belonging as the idealized realm for an ethics of long-term care.

When juxtaposed against idealized moments of empathetic resolution, Brechtian strategies of comedy in theatre staging migration become diluted, risking introspective responses from audiences. Once again, this prioritizes the private rumination of the individual, feeling audience member at the expense of alerting audiences – particularly British ones – to the fact that they have rights by virtue of their citizenship, and that they have the agency to mobilize politically to change the material realities for asylum seekers kept in conditions of precarity both within the UK and at the border. Furthermore, such moments of resolution neuter the audience’s ability to think creatively on what is being represented in a more collective manner. If a comedic model which forced the audience to wrestle with the implications of their laughter and their presence witnessing this ongoing history were employed, then audiences might be encouraged to consider new conditions of belonging, beyond the bounds of what is naturalized by the state, or indeed by the theatre industry.

Conclusion

Upon leaving the Playhouse Theatre when *The Jungle* was over, audiences were handed an exit flyer, with the question *What Can I Do?* on one side of the page. On the other, suggestions included donating to the charity Help Refugees, donating goods, volunteering, hosting a refugee in your home or writing to your parliamentary representative. Though this gave audiences guidance on how to translate their affective responses into some kind of tangible action, the suggestions proposed still situate meaningful change at the site of the individual – something which the play for two and half hours previously had seemed to critique in the representations of British volunteer characters. The suggestions continue to valorize the proximity of the individual spectator to the migrant subject as a way of productively fostering empathy, and this being sufficient political praxis. In the arena of political change, like Ahmed, I am sceptical of what a conflation of proximity with compassion can achieve – what idealizing emotional identification as a basis for politics can do.⁴¹ Perhaps a more genuinely politically provocative suggestion from Good Chance would have been to provide the *What Can I Do?* leaflet as a page which had no answers. Perhaps then the political urgency of the work, and of staging it in this location, at this time, in a collective of people, could lead somewhere with a more collective ambition, one which the company does not try to provide the script for.

Through the example of Good Chance Theatre's *The Jungle*, this article has argued for caution in the staging of ongoing issues in migration. I have taken issue with the use of immersive strategies in contemporary migration work, as they can often leave the burden of responsibility upon the individual spectator, deflecting – counterproductively – blame from the broader political establishment. Finally, I have troubled the use of Brechtian modalities of humour as impotent when juxtaposed against strategies of empathy. Strategies of empathy – perhaps unwittingly – provide a simple resolution when they follow moments of comedy, which vest in them the potential for audience members to have a more creative and interrogative critical stance once the laughter has died down.

Whilst it is of paramount importance that the nuances of migration be represented in challenging, difficult ways artistically, I see the necessary political power of this work as something which cannot be realized in the confection of sameness through ideas of closeness and belonging. Instead, productions representing migration should maintain a critical distance from existing structures of political power, resist dramaturgies of proximity which simplify differences, and allow their audiences the creative and critical imagination to be politically mobilized at and beyond the site of performance.

NOTES

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- 2 The Treaty of Le Touquet, agreed between the British and French governments in 2003, established juxtaposed controls at the respective border crossings in the UK and France. This, according to the House of Lords European Committee, has had a direct impact upon undocumented migrants and refugees attempting to claim asylum in the UK, as they are prohibited by the border control erected in Calais, France. This has led to the establishment of the many informal refugee camps which have existed in Calais over the past two decades. See Parliament, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldcom/428/42806.htm#footnote-126-backlink>, accessed 16 June 2020. In more recent years, an amendment to the Immigration Bill in 2016 ensured that three thousand unaccompanied children could claim asylum in the UK every year. In 2020, however, this was voted down in Parliament.
- 3 For example, the 2016–17 *Horizons* programme at the Young Vic and a number of theatre companies dedicated to making work with, about and for migrant communities, such as LegalAlien Theatre, Phosphorous Theatre and Maison Foo.
- 4 National Theatre, www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/jungle-playhouse-theatre, accessed 9 June 2020.
- 5 See promotional and reception materials which example this: Sophie Gilbert, 'The Spectacular Humanity of The Jungle', *The Atlantic*, 24 December 2017, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/12/the-jungle-young-vic/548909, accessed 25 April 2020; Frank Scheck, "'The Jungle': Theater Review' *Hollywood Reporter*, 9 December 2018, www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/the-jungle-theater-1167809, accessed 25 April 2020; National Theatre (n. 2 above); and Umberto Bacchi, 'West End Theater Turns Migrant Camp to Get London Audience Talking', *Reuters*, 20 June 2018, www.reuters.com/article/us-

- britain-migrants-play/west-end-theater-turns-migrant-camp-to-get-london-audience-talking-idUSKBN1JG2ZT, accessed 25 April 2020.
- 6 Joe Robertson and Joe Murphy, *The Jungle*, dir. Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin, performances by Ammar Haj Ahmad, Ben Turner, John Pfuomojena *et al.* Good Chance Theatre Company, 2 August 2018, Playhouse Theatre, London.
- 7 Lauren Berlant, *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 4, emphasis in original.
- 8 The Playhouse Theatre is a West End theatre, located in Westminster, a neighbourhood perceived as symbolic of political power in the UK.
- 9 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 133.
- 10 Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, *The Jungle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018).
- 11 I use the term ‘comedic migrant’ from Yana Meerzon’s definition of the character type. This is a concept I will expand upon later in the article. See Yana Meerzon, ‘From Melancholic to Happy Immigrant: Staging Simpleton in the Comedies of Migration’, *Performing Ethos*, 9 (2019), pp. 23–35, here p. 25.
- 12 Paul Mason, ‘The Jungle: An Urgent Play Gives a Voice to Refugees’, *New Statesman*, 5 July 2018, www.newstatesman.com/culture/music-theatre/2018/07/jungle-urgent-play-gives-voice-refugees, accessed 25 April 2020.
- 13 See, for media describing *The Jungle* as a misfit in the West End, Dominic Cavendish, ‘The Jungle Review, Playhouse Theatre – The Most Important Play in the West End’, *The Telegraph*, 8 July 2018, www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/jungle-review-playhouse-theatre-important-play-west-end, accessed 25 April 2020; and Hannah Beckerman, ‘Sonia Friedman: ‘Sexist Guys? It’s Not Their Time Any More’, *Financial Times*, 5 October 2018, www.ft.com/content/obdd5152-c69a-11e8-ba8f-ee390057b8c9, accessed 25 April 2020.
- 14 See, for example, Lynette Goddard’s discussion of the Arts Council England’s report *Eclipse: Developing Strategies to Combat Racism in the Theatre* in 2002: ‘The recommendations suggested strategies designed to overturn assumptions of certain types of work as high risk’. Lynette Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 35.
- 15 Sonia Friedman in Mason, ‘The Jungle’, n.p.
- 16 Olivia Lamont-Bishop, ‘Four Thoughts on Place and *The Jungle*’, *Performing Ethos*, 9 (2019), pp. 105–10, here p. 106.
- 17 David Savran, ‘Shadows of Brecht’, in Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, eds., *Critical Theory and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 268–83, here p. 275.
- 18 The Young Vic, www.youngvic.org/taking-part, accessed 17 June 2020.
- 19 User Emily W in Alice Saville, ‘“The Jungle” Review’, *Time Out*, 6 July 2018, www.timeout.com/london/theatre/the-jungle-review, accessed 25 April 2020.
- 20 Twitter users @dannyboyfriar and @J9RAE79 in ‘The Jungle at the Playhouse Theatre: Audience Reactions’, *National Theatre on YouTube*, 20 July 2018, <https://youtu.be/rQNSeiFSAmo>, accessed 26 April 2020.
- 21 Jill Dolan, ‘Chapter One: Introduction: Feeling the Potential of Elsewhere’, in Dolan, *Utopia in Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), pp. 1–34, here p. 11.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 23 Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics and Productive Participation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 4.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 25 National Theatre Wales, www.nationaltheatrewales.org/ntw_shows/tidewhisperer-2, accessed 26 April 2020.
- 26 Ruth Comerford, ‘LegalAliens’ Lara Parmiani: “We Want to Get a Different Perspective on Migration”’, *The Stage*, 24 February 2020, www.thestage.co.uk/features/legalaliens-lara-parmiani-we-want-to-get-a-different-perspective-on-migration, accessed 18 May 2020.

- 27 The Cultural Frontline, 'Understanding the Refugee Crisis Via Virtual Reality', *BBC Sounds*, (02:06), 6 August 2016, www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p043of89, accessed 26 April 2020.
- 28 Ibid. (03:09).
- 29 Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre*, p. 11.
- 30 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 138.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Bertolt Brecht in Marc Silberman, 'Bertolt Brecht, Politics, and Comedy', *Social Research*, 79, 1 (Spring 2012), pp. 169–88, here p. 169.
- 33 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (Urbana, IL: Project Gutenberg, 2002), www.gutenberg.org/files/4352/4352-h/4352-h.htm, accessed 26 April 2020.
- 34 For examples of how the National Theatre has been critiqued for its representations of immigration see Michael Billington, 'England People Very Nice', *The Guardian*, 12 February 2009, www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/feb/12/england-people-very-nice-review, accessed 25 April 2020; and Susannah Clapp, 'My Country: A Work in Progress Review – A Laudable but Limp Look at Brexit Britain', *The Observer*, 19 March 2017, www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/mar/19/my-country-work-in-progress-dorfman-observer-review, accessed 25 April 2020. One example where the theatre was celebrated in its representations of immigration was Helen Edmundson's adaptation of Andrea Levy's novel *Small Island*, which had a sold-out run at the theatre in 2019 and was broadcast online in June 2020. The play explores the Windrush generation of Jamaicans who moved to Britain during the mid-twentieth century, dramatizing some of the racism and hardships faced by Jamaicans in the UK.
- 35 Ava Wong Davies, 'Edinburgh Fringe Review: Sht Theatre Drink Rum with Expats', *Exeunt Magazine*, 12 August 2019, www.exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/edinburgh-fringe-review-sht-theatre-drink-rum-expats, accessed 30 April 2020.
- 36 Meerzon, 'From Melancholic to Happy Immigrant', p. 28.
- 37 Ibid, p. 25.
- 38 Robertson and Murphy, *The Jungle*, p. 95.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 138.
- 41 Ahmed, *ibid.*, p. 141, makes a similar observation in the context of love specifically.

EMMA WELTON (emwe8914@student.su.se) is a Second-Year Master's Student in performance studies at Stockholm University, during which she has been the recipient of a Leverhulme Trust Study Abroad studentship. She is a theatre-maker and writer, with recent writing appearing in the *New Statesman*. She is currently writing her master's thesis on queer performance artists in contemporary Britain.