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2019

<https://doi.org/10.25595/2054>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bouziouri, Martha: *Dramaturgies of the 'Other': Self-Making & Sense-Making in Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, in: FKW : Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur (2019) Nr. 66, 87–100.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25595/2054>.

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## DRAMATURGIES OF THE 'OTHER': SELF-MAKING & SENSE-MAKING IN CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARY THEATRE

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The refugee issue has inevitably affected contemporary theatre, as manifested in its choice of topic and internalized mission. Plays that dramatize the refugee experience proliferate all across Europe, driven by a commitment to challenge prejudices and wrongdoings against refugees and to advocate their rights. These plays often engage refugees as informants, building on their actual testimonies and experiences (Fragkou 2018) in the tradition of documentary theatre (Forsyth & Megson 2009).<sup>1)</sup> More recently, a new category has gained ground, including theatre productions that involve refugees as 'experts' on stage, offering their professional or personal insights and co-shaping the play's narrative (Garde & Mumford 2016).<sup>2)</sup>

— Theatre is, structurally and intellectually, a place that elicits empathy through the physical, intimate coexistence between performers and audience. Documentary theatre in particular, can potentially intensify this empathy: its audience is aware that it concerns stories and experiences of actual people whose distinctive faces cannot be ignored. However, refugee representations on stage often reveal the face of a victim, employing a language similar to that of humanitarian discourse. While we can in principle acknowledge theatre makers' well-meaning effort to invoke empathy, denounce injustice and stir social change, a significant part of contemporary dramaturgy leans on awareness of the suffering, invoking audience's emotional response through the dramatization of traumatic experiences. However, this *empathetic unsettlement* usually has a temporary effect and does not necessarily enable political or moral action; it might well "function for an alibi for lack of action" and "risk offering up traumatic representation for vicarious voyeurs" (Little 2011: n. pag.). Alison Jeffers attempts a thorough look into the ways contemporary (English and Australian) theatre stages the refugee identity, and poses the same pressing question that guides this article: "How are theatre practitioners to honor the experiences of the participants [...] and challenge prejudice against those participants without resorting to demonstrations of victimhood?" (2012: 143).

— As a person that moves between scholarship (social anthropology) and artistic creation (documentary theatre making), I try to remain conscious of the power relations at play in both

1) Documentary theatre is rooted in nonfictional, researched reality. Its script is composed of original or archival resources.

2) The term 'expert' was coined by the German theatre collective Rimini Protokoll and refers to their work with "experts of the everyday life" („Experten des Alltags"). Examples of suchlike plays in a Greek context include, among others, *Case Farmakonisi or The Right of Water* (2015) by A. Azas & M. Bouziouri and *We Are The Persians* (2015) by Y. Markopoulou.

areas and the subsequent responsibility for the narratives that we produce. A major part of my work attests to the need to move beyond simplified humanitarian messages about people of refugee background and to invent a counter-storytelling that replaces short-lived compassion with a culture of intimacy and acknowledgement of people's agency, expertise and multifaceted identities. Given its possibilities for collectively-informed artistic creation, documentary theatre might open a small crack in this direction, additionally fueled by the ethical and methodological principles of modern ethnography as this article will address later on.

— At the same time, documentary theatre remains a slippery territory, dealing with real people and sensitive stories which unfold around a traumatic core. Prominent scholars and practitioners maintain a critical stance on documentary theatre, recognizing the dangers of “titillating an audience at someone's expense” (Soans 2008: 36) and reflecting on whether it is “inherently exploitive or voyeuristic” (Hammond & Steward 2008: 12). Documentary theatre makers are indeed in a constant pursuit of a delicate balance: they aspire to create a theatrically engaging and impactful work that honors the trust of its participants and audience without succumbing to the lures of hyper-aestheticization and sensationalism. The need to achieve this balance in refugee-centered documentary theatre productions becomes all the more persistent, given the proliferation of a Eurocentric, victimizing discourse on the refugee ‘other’.

— The article reflects exactly on the staging of the ‘traumatic real’ (Little 2010) and the representational practices of victimhood which contemporary theatre occasionally reserves for migrants and refugees, attempting to highlight some of the ethical and political implications entailed in these practices. My analysis – which is mainly informed by the Greek context – does not provide a comprehensive examination of certain plays (case-studies); it draws, instead, from my ethnographic/creative encounters with people involved in the theatre practice and the impact that victimhood-oriented dramaturgies have on them.<sup>3)</sup> The article goes on to propose a documentary theatre approach that aspires to challenge the representational modalities of vulnerability and trauma by turning the stage into a self-reflective space for critical creativity. The proposed approach was put together in the documentary theatre workshop series *From Field to Stage: Dramaturgies of the Other* that I developed in 2018.<sup>4)</sup>

— The workshop problematizes the figure of the refugee as a victim and sets to explore stage alternatives to the ‘victimhood’-

3) All names are altered to preserve informants' anonymity and confidentiality.

4) The workshop has so far been realized in the framework of i. Warsaw Biennale, in collaboration with the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art, April 11–17, 2018; ii. Thessaloniki International Documentary Festival, with the support of the Greek Film Center, March 2–8, 2019; iii. Hellenic Theatre/Drama Education Network, Theatre Summer Camp, Pelion, August 25–31, 2019.

narrative. It is primarily addressed to creative professionals in the fields of theatre and cinema (directors, dramatists, scriptwriters, actors), and reflects my aspiration, on the one hand, to contribute to the shaping of emerging dramaturgies and, on the other, to improve my own work through a process of mutual learning. At this point, I need to state that in no way I am suggesting that the entirety of contemporary dramaturgy portrays the refugee identity through the lenses of victimhood. My aim is to stir a fruitful discussion on the risks, intricacies and tensions underpinning refugee – and previously migrant – representations on stage, and proceeding from this premise, to elaborate on the new directions that the encounter of documentary theatre with ethnography opens, in regard to the dramatisation of the ‘other’.

### STAGING VICTIMHOOD: IS THE REFUGEE THE NEW IMMIGRANT?

— Some years ago, I took on a PhD that prompted me to revisit a previously familiar space – stage – as a field of anthropological knowledge. In brief, my thesis focuses on the identity, artistic expression and reception of Greece-based theatre artists of migrant background.<sup>5)</sup> While in the field, I made an observation regarding contemporary Greek theatre and its relation to migration: before the late 2000’s, when immigrants first took the stage as professional writers, directors and/or performers of their own works, they had featured as the *dramatis personae* in plays written and staged by Greek artists who reflected on the transition of Greece into a migrant receiving society.<sup>6)</sup>

— For more than a decade (early 1990’s to early 2000’s), the dominant stereotypes Greek society had reserved for its migrants occupied the two extremes of the ‘victim or threat’ dipole: on the one end, we encounter the image of the poor, miserable immigrant who is willing to take any job in order to survive, while enduring prejudice and humiliation. On the other end, we come across the dangerous *lathrometanastis*; a derogative term used to denote the ‘clandestine migrant’ who is “quasi-automatically associated to criminal behaviour” (Kokali 2011: 170). Greek playwrights generally opted for a victimhood-driven narrative, as a way to expose the misconceptions of immigrants and the negative impact on them.

— The first plays with relevant content appeared in 1997, the topic peaked in the mid-2000’s.<sup>7)</sup> With a few exceptions, they are works of pure fiction. Comedies – the first to stage representations of a new trans-cultural social reality – are basically concerned with parodying Greeks and their xenophobic, snobbish or hostile

5) The thesis, entitled ‘Theatre Makers with Migrant Background: Representations of Identity and Artistic Expression in Contemporary Greek Theatre – Towards an Anthropology of Intimacy’ (Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Dpt. of Social Anthropology) explores if and how the migrant experience has informed artists’ work in relation to topic, approach and aesthetics. Moreover, it examines the representation and accreditation practices reserved for migrant theatre artists in association with the concepts of victimization and exoticism.

6) In the early ‘90s, upon the collapse of communism, Greece, traditionally an immigrant-exporting country turned into an immigrant-destination country.

7) Indicative plays by Greek playwrights include: *Dads with Rum* (1997) & *Evros Across* (2000) by T.Reppas-M.Papathanasiou, *Unshaved Chins* (2006) by G.Tsiros, and *Here* (2007) by G.Nanouris. (Translation titles: MB)

attitude towards immigrants. It is thus the Greek character that comes under scrutiny, whereas the migrant character serves as the tinder that sparks the pathologies of Greek society. Social or psychological dramas, on the other hand, build their dramaturgical arc on migrants' arduous lives, informed by Greeks' prejudice and ill treatment. In some of these plays, characters lack depth and development. They are predictable, because they lean on stereotypes for migrants used in real life.

— The representation of migrants on stage mainly focuses on male characters. When female characters appeared on stage for the first time, they were basically informed by stereotypes that are mainly associated with their assumed position in the labor market. On the one hand, they appeared as cheap and docile domestic workers. On the other hand, they were represented as prostitutes or victims of trafficking networks, young and naïve nationals of ex-socialist countries seduced by the promise of a better life. In whichever context, they appeared as passive, lacking agency and subject to gender violence and sexual harassment<sup>8)</sup>.

— Greek new drama on migration abounds with undocumented migrants, lower class workers, or sexually abused women. Stories of trauma, misfortune and exploitation prevail. In this light, a certain skepticism emerges: is it possible that artists maintain oversimplified or stereotyped perceptions about immigrants in real life? Contemporary dramaturgy's growing fascination for real stories, and the impact it has on its protagonists makes the question even more relevant:

*"I don't enjoy this obsession with my migrant identity. Some time ago, I participated in a theatre group and the director, in every single rehearsal would go on and ask me: 'How did you get here? Do you miss home? Tell us about your experience; it must have been tough, right?' Everyday I was addressed the same questions. For months, I was pushed into talking about private stuff [...]. I felt cheated and violated, and decided to leave the group. Naïve me! I thought I was hired for my qualifications, not my story."*

(Nadia, Bulgarian actress)<sup>9)</sup>

— It seems that in the eyes of her director, Nadia was the perfect source for a good, moving story. He was looking for spectacular drama for his play on home and exile and her role was to provide it. In the end, Nadia chose not to surrender to the expectations that

8) More recently, documentary theatre has attempted to problematise the stereotyped representation of female immigrants, for instance in *Clean City (2016)* by A. Azas-P.Tsinikoris and *Amarynthos (2018)* by M. Bouziouri.

9) Personal interview, Athens, 2012 (PhD research diary excerpt)

would have turned her body into a “site of an incorporated history” (Butler 1997: 152), forged and forcefully imposed by others. In the course of our discussion, Nadia emphasized that she did not have a story of misfortune to satisfy her director with in the first place. As a child of economic migrants, she had a smooth transition in Greece and grew up in a loving family environment with no significant problems whatsoever. “In fact, the most traumatic event I have ever experienced was my participation in this theatre group and my treatment as an object of pity.

— Today, Nadia is no longer active in acting, like a number of other female migrant actresses of her generation. Can it be that their ethnic labeling had something to do with their withdrawal? It is striking to observe that in the following years, the force-fed image of victimhood was transposed to a new ethnic subject: the *refugee*. Let me illustrate that with a second example:

*„If I wanted to watch a migrant drama, I would have turned my TV on. It makes me mad how artists fail to see anything beyond our hardships. Suffering is very convenient cause it’s stimulating. What is your point? To make audiences cry? Sympathize with the poor, miserable refugee? Refugees are human beings and live in the margins of our society, hallo! What a discovery! Did you care a tiny bit to know a little more about us, before presenting us with a fake name – when not nameless – and a tear-dropping label? Did you care to ask if we want to be constantly reminded of our precarious state? Since you live off my identity, I want to be reminded of positive things and I want you to learn about my dreams and my culture and the things I am good at and the things we might have in common.”*

(Arman, Iranian actor)<sup>10)</sup>

— Seven years ago, Arman reached Greece on a student visa, anticipating an exciting career in the country “that gave birth to theatre and philosophy” – those were his exact words. But Greece did not quite live up to his expectations. Soon enough, he realized that what was reserved for him was not a career as an actor but as a refugee. However, Arman does not identify with the refugee label: “I did not leave my country a refugee, but funnily enough, I became a refugee here, in your free, democratic country”. This became apparent to him during his first encounters with native directors, who repeatedly approached him for the role of ‘the Arab’,

10) Personal interview, Athens, 2016  
(PhD research diary excerpt)

‘the exile’ or ‘the stranded refugee’. Whenever he tried to explain that he was a privileged Iranian guy whose wealthy, supportive parents sustained his studies abroad, they would shift focus and ask about teleported instances of human rights abuse that take place in his country. “It’s pointless. They are only prepared to hear what they want to hear”, he concluded. Speaking of expectations: what exactly do we want to hear as audience when it comes to the refugee issue? And what do we wish to say as artists?

— A growing part of politically engaged theatre has already been offering relevant works. Among them, a popular trend is the staging of the original text or adaptation of Greek ancient tragedies such as *Antigone*, *The Suppliants*, *The Trojan Women* and *Hecuba* in order “to emphasize the plight of the dispossessed [...] and comment on the current refugee situation” (Wilmer 2018: 13). Another emerging category arises as part of wider educational, empowerment or awareness programs that draw on community/participatory theatre activities and techniques (such as devised theatre).<sup>11)</sup> In majority, these plays develop from a sustained period of work with refugee participants, mainly children, adolescents and women, and are based on testimonies and biographical material. Overall, the quest for personal stories is taking the lead in refugee-focused dramaturgies, both in conventional professional theatre productions and social intervention contexts. Some of these works, assumedly in an effort to raise awareness, evoke empathy and stimulate solidarity, often employing a victimizing narrative that builds on suffering and trauma, similar to that previously reserved for immigrants.

— Undoubtedly, theatre cannot stand indifferent to the wrongdoings and challenges of the real world. However, it is hard to avoid a certain reservation as to whether a repertoire that opts for “a preoccupation with the experience of loss and a privileging of trauma as a mode of knowledge” (Salverson 2001: 122) manages to disrupt the normative categorization of the refugee subject and to produce an aesthetic of critical encounter. In this light, my scepticism is not aimed at the chosen subject matter *per se*, but rather at its enactment and its imprint on a sociopolitical level. In my view, refugee-as-victim-led dramaturgies fail to offer heterogeneous and heterodox renderings of the refugee identity/experience; rarely do we see on stage a transgressive refugee character that resists the reductive clichés of *refugeeness*. Such clichés are further intensified by visual conventions such as the projection of ‘refugees in rubber boats’ footage or the ‘dress code’ of refugee characters/protagonists, who appear on stage wearing

**11)** In Greece, suchlike theatre-based activities and events have been organized, among others, by the Greek National Theatre and the Municipal Theatre of Piraeus.



backpacks, life jackets or low thermal blankets. In this context, theatre makers may turn the stage into a magnifying glass of social reality but fail to re-imagine it. They don't imagine change. Their plays stage injustice but do not stage visions of an alternative, wishful reality. Instead of "suggesting practical new possibilities" (Sierz 2011: 242), they assume there is no feasible way for refugees to escape their arduous realities.

— A last aspect to take into account while working with 'real people' in theatre is the psychological impact that the quest for personal stories might have on the subjects. While in Shatila refugee settlement, a group of Syrian women who had been approached by a foreign theatre group that was developing a play on domestic violence, told me how upset they became during the interviews: "We were interrogated in a persisting, manipulative manner. They literally forced us to confirm their assumptions. A woman who had problems at home broke down in one of the meetings. They came, took our stories and left."<sup>12</sup> As Diana Meyers has argued (2016), asking a person to share sensitive personal data in an insensitive manner might expose them to the revival of traumatic memories with serious implications for their emotional or psychological health.

#### **UNSTAGING VICTIMHOOD: A CRITICAL ENCOUNTER BETWEEN DOCUMENTARY THEATRE AND MODERN ETHNOGRAPHY**

— If theatre makers are determined to move from trauma to more nuanced and under-represented aspects of the refugee condition – for all the reasons that this article has highlighted – it would be helpful to critically revisit both our positionality and intentionality while 'making stories' about/from real people's experiences. The encounter of documentary theatre with ethnography might open up new possibilities in this direction. By default, documentary theatre shares some structural characteristics with the ethnographic endeavor: it requires an extensive research phase to formulate its core subject and structure its dramaturgy, it utilizes the same research tools and practices (informal conversations, interviews, archive material, audiovisual footage etc), and it relies on experts/informants' inputs to build its story. Beyond their obvious similarities though, they have something else in common: the challenge entailed in the act of 'speaking for others'. What in contemporary anthropological praxis is known as a 'crisis of representation' (Clifford & Marcus 1986) is equally and persistently troubling documentary theatre and, in the context of this article, its representational modes of refugee experience.

<sup>12</sup> Personal interview, Beirut, 2015 (in the framework of *Traces* documentary theatre project)



—— I do not want to suggest that ethnography can provide copy-pasted solutions to refugee-centered dramaturgies, but it can serve as a point of departure for a new generation of politically engaged theatre makers who remain aware of their positionality and how it informs their creative interactions with refugees as well as their work<sup>13)</sup>. Ethnography's enduring quest to reflect on its own conditions of knowledge production and representation (Clifford 1983) and to disrupt the authoritative voice of the omniscient yet invisible ethnographer has translated into research/writing techniques that expose not only the process of knowledge production but also the ethnographer throughout the ethnographic text. The last part of my contribution attempts to display exactly how these techniques can be re-contextualised and adapted for the stage. In this effort, I will use examples from the workshop series *From Field to Stage: Dramaturgies of the Other*, which, as mentioned in the introduction, builds on the intellectual convergences between documentary theatre and ethnography to counter 'victimhood'-narratives.

#### **THE ARTIST IS VISIBLE: UNFOLDING THE PROCESS OF THEATRE MAKING**

—— Julie Salverson argues that “[a]rtists working in popular theatre tend to eliminate ourselves from the very participatory process we invoke so urgently” (2001: 120). Can documentary theatre, sensitive to the hierarchical structures of representation, expose the artist to the audience? Filewood answers that it can, when it “tends to put the process by which it is created into the fore by including references to that process within the performance itself” (1987: ix-x). His response reminds us of ethnography's concept of reflexivity and its firm preoccupation with how “the ‘experientiality’ of the experience is constituted” (Crapanzano 2006: 397). Modern ethnographers observe themselves while observing their field, saluting Schechner's proposition that “[e]thnography demands a double vision, inside and outside simultaneously or alternately” (1985: 109). They infuse their texts with fragile moments of awkwardness, uncertainty or disappointment. They address the effect their presence has on their subjects, and the other way around.

—— In a similar fashion, artists of documentary theatre who obtain, shape and present the stories of others, can choose to remain hidden behind a privileged positionality or to become visible instead. This act of visibility acknowledges the ethical challenges and practical limitations of dealing with personal stories by putting fragments of the theatre-making process on stage.

**13)** The article does not look into the emerging work of refugee theatre makers, which constitutes an interesting field of inquiry. The number of theatre projects/events produced by refugees, often with support of established theatres or festivals, is rising sharply.

— During the workshop the opportunity to talk about this difficult process arose when Adam, an English participant currently residing in Warsaw, returned to class disappointed, and announced that the assigned interview hadn't worked out and that he had nothing to share with the group.<sup>14)</sup> Adam had intended to present Salim, a young man from Bangladesh who had reached Poland a couple of years ago and now worked in a local kebab shop near Adam's flat. "I wasn't able to learn anything about his life. I messed it up. I felt so awkward and embarrassed!" Adam exclaimed. I told him that we often end up with seemingly non-productive interviews in both fields (ethnography - documentary theatre), yet such 'failures' help us reflect on the process: the timing, the place, our own attitudes and feelings as well as those of others. Adam was finally convinced to 'revisit' his encounter with Salim and here is a small excerpt of what he shared:

14) During the workshop's preparatory phase, participants are encouraged to interview a person with a refugee experience, and write a text that introduces this person to the group.

*I first met him in February, when I had just arrived; It was really comforting to speak to another non-native citizen... I went to the shop yesterday at around 6pm to buy some chips and to speak to him, explaining the intentions of the workshop and the piece of theatre we are creating. The shop was very busy; The music that was playing may have been a Bengali radio station... I had an immediate feeling that this was not going to be the intimate, one-on-one conversation I'd become used to. I found the place so overwhelming that I couldn't figure out how to adjust my approach to him. Perhaps because I was trying to explain the workshop in a way that would be not misleading to him, I don't think I did a great job of explaining it. It went something like:*

*Salim: Hey! Hello! How are you?*

*Me: Good, good... how have you been?*

*Salim: Fine! Adam!?*

*Me: Salim!*

*Salim: Oh, you remember me!*

*He was happily surprised I remembered his name.*

*Me: Erm.. I'm doing a workshop next week...about people from a background... who are in Warsaw but are not Polish. I was wondering if you'd be interested in, like, me... talking to you or... ha...*

*Salim: I have no time... always busy.*

*Me: Ah I see, you have no time, but could I come in to the shop and talk to you, or...?*

*Salim: No because I... our owner no permission, it is not permitted.*

*Me: Oh, right, okay!*

*Salim: Because the environment is not..*

*Me: Oh no, okay.*

*Salim: Sorry.*

*He seemed stressed by me asking – his smile was there but there was an undertone of anxiety. I think he felt as if he was being watched, and was obviously nervous about his job security. My naive expectation that he might take me on a tour around his shop now seemed to be a wild, implausible notion. I realized I would not even be able to take his voice with me...*

— Adam gave us access to the ‘behind-the-scenes’ process of documentary theatre making. He chose to become visible and expose himself by acknowledging the “personal inadequacy and social failure” (Hume & Mulcock 2004: xii) on the part of the artist/researcher who tries to approach another person and finds himself in “awkward social spaces” (ibid: xi). In a sense, his account transposed the focus from the vulnerability of the refugee subject to the vulnerability of the artist and his inadequacy, discomfort and failure to establish intimacy while trying to assemble his stage narrative.

**THE ARTIST IS VISIBLE: BIOGRAPHIZING THE SELF** — At some point during the workshop, participants were asked the question: “Have you ever experienced a ‘state of otherness?’” In essence, they were invited to introspect and reflect on familiar experiences, past and present, loosely or directly associated with our subject matter (refugee condition). The question was not meant to make a ‘we are all refugees’ claim and certainly did not stem from a guilt-driven desire to exorcise privilege or power by means of some abstract intellectual introspection. It rather aimed to stimulate, on the one hand, an evocative reflection on what it means to share sensitive or even traumatic personal experiences in public and, on the other hand, to transpose the focus from the unfamiliar outsider to the unfamiliar within oneself. Participants were encouraged to draw on their own biographies in the tradition of autoethnography<sup>15</sup>:

<sup>15</sup> As a research practice, autoethnography combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography. The author draws on and systematically analyzes personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand and illustrate cultural experience (*ethno*) (Ellis 2004).

in quest of the 'other', they looked at themselves. The works they wrote and performed were genuine samples of what we call 'autoethnographic performance'<sup>16</sup> (Spry 2011).

The first person to come forward was Monika, a Polish participant who shared her personal experience of a rather symbolic 'refugee condition', enforced on her in a transitional phase in her life:

*The story dates back to 2011. I was excited to follow a new trajectory of my life; studies in Germany; but after one of many repeated stays in hospitals at that time, my grandma passed away. She had always played a very important role in my life. Everyone encouraged me to get to Germany despite the funeral, because in German culture, punctuality is a strong demand. However, I decided to stay and take part in the ceremony, and therefore I came late for classes. When I entered the classroom everything seemed normal. Except that the space was divided into groups. German students were sitting on the left side of the tables, and the right side was reserved for the foreign students – a mix of Erasmus students, and students from Eastern Europe, with one Pakistani girl. I took a seat close to a German student, because I didn't have my textbook yet. All of a sudden I felt paralyzed, because it quickly turned out that I encroached upon alien territory and both sides of the table were staring at me with question marks in their eyes. After class, when heading back home, one of my classmates said: ‚Ich dachte, Polen sind gut in Feldarbeiten‘, which can be translated into English as ‚Polish people are good at fieldwork‘ [...].*

—— Monika shared her experience of alienation/stigmatisation/exclusion as a foreign student from Poland during her studies in Germany. Her autobiographical piece surfaced in the context of a class about refugee-centered dramaturgies that seek to challenge the binaries between speaking about the 'other' and speaking for the 'self'. The 'state of otherness' question, while acknowledging the limitations of dichotomies ('us/others') with reference to the refugee representation, served as a stimulus for a self-reflective discussion among the group in relation to the concepts and contents of 'exile' and 'vulnerability'.

**WHAT DOES A REFUGEE LOOK LIKE?** —— The ultimate objective of the workshop has been to equip emerging theatre professionals

**16)** In autoethnographic performance (also known as autoethnodramatic performance), playwrights' personal memories and experiences become sources for the dramatic text, which is, conventionally, performed by themselves. See, for example, the work of Deidre Heddon (2008).

with tools that allow them to conceive, dramatise and stage counter-narratives that bring forward non-saturated, non-victimising aspects of refugee identity and experience. Keeping in mind that when it comes to stories about refugees “visibility and the commodification of suffering go hand in hand” (Edmondson 2012:15), participants were encouraged to abstain from traumatised biographies and to dare experiment with non-anticipated portraits that challenge the reductive assumption that refugees can only be seen and understood in the light of victimhood, loss and deprivation. In this light, each participant was asked to make a portrait of a person with a refugee experience with whom they were connected to a certain degree (e.g. friend, colleague, neighbor). An established level of intimacy was a requirement, in order to demonstrate how the representational angle drastically shifts, depending on the nature and depth of our relationship with our subjects. Eventually, the stories that participants laid on the table highlighted subtle and diverse shades of the refugee experience; they were intimate, humorous and moving, without being emotionally exploitative.

— Laura talked about her romantic affair with a Nigerian chemical engineer and their first, hilarious date; Marios brought in an emancipated Pakistani girl from his amateur theatre group, who dreams to air her own YouTube channel on beauty tips and reach a million subscribers; Tasos introduced us to his great-grandmother, a seasoned woman who came to Greece in 1922 as a refugee from Turkey; Alex shared a rather negative experience he had as an economic migrant in Sweden: a Syrian ‘bourgeoisie girl’ approached him – attracted by his European passport – with a view to marrying him and solving her paper issues; Nora chose to tell the story of a Syrian girl through the eyes of her cat, whom she secretly carried in a baby sleep sack across their journey to Greece... Stories as these subvert the anticipated portrayal of the imagined ‘other’. Refugees are no longer a distant, abstract or stereotyped amalgam of what we hear, read or watch; they are lovers, relatives, friends, people we admire, like or dislike. In this way, the stage challenges the ‘victimhood label’ as the only possible identity and can, hopefully, become a space for restored normalcy.

**AN INVITING QUESTION, INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION** — There are valid arguments that explain why a significant part of contemporary dramaturgies insist on placing their spotlight on the traumatic side of the refugee condition. Yet, as this article aimed to illustrate, our individual and collective perspectives are in dire need of a narrative that goes beyond binary concepts of victims

and abusers, 'others' and 'us'. Theatre has the ability – and it would be a pity not to make use of it – to establish a space for mutually enriching interaction and understanding. In this regard, I have shown how the representational ethics and respective modalities of ethnography can potentially inspire theatre – and documentary theatre in particular – to dig deeper and beyond valid but oversaturated stories of victimhood. They can help to highlight overlooked angles of the life and identity of persons of refugee background in a more nuanced and politically meaningful way.

— On this account, I do not conclude with a pre-outlined prescription for staging the refugee experience or a theory of 'dramatic ethics'. What I rather mean to achieve with this contribution is to draw attention to the ethical and political intricacies of refugee representation on stage, arguing that the way we construct a narrative is not only an aesthetically, but also socio-politically situated choice, and in this sense, "a site of moral responsibility" (Richardson 1990: 131). In making this claim, I follow Elliot G. Mishler in his argument that "it is clear that we do not find stories; we make stories. Personal narrative is not 'given' as a text; rather, personal narrative is a strategic practice of textualising and contextualising performance" (1995: 117). When the stories we make as theatre makers critically "encode (and perform) history" (Schechner 1985: 51) without resorting to hyper-aestheticized, oversimplified renderings of the refugee condition, then they will hopefully bring about compelling responses to Bharucha's challenging question: "When the play ends, what remains? When the play ends, what begins?" (2011: 366).

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// FKW is supported by the Mariann Steegmann Institute and the Institute for Cultural Studies in the Arts Zurich University of the Arts

Sigrid Adorf / Kerstin Brandes / Edith Futscher / Kathrin Heinz / Anja Herrmann / Marietta Kesting / Marianne Koos / Mona Schieren / Kea Wienand / Anja Zimmermann // [www.fkw-journal.de](http://www.fkw-journal.de)

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