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PERFORMANCE AND ASYLUM: EMBODIMENT, ETHICS, COMMUNITY

Summary

Focussing on theatrical performance, this transnational research network examines issues concerning refugees and asylum seekers in Britain and Australia by facilitating connections between researchers, theatre practitioners and community stakeholders. The complexity of refugee representation (by refugees and others) as it relates to globalisation and fears about national security will be explored via a series of activities, including workshops, symposia and internet discussions. While highlighting performance as an exemplary medium through which to explore questions about identity, belonging, refuge, corporeality, surveillance and ethics, the network also aims to involve scholars from other disciplines to expand and energise specific, performance-based research work.

Rationale and context

The United Nations has identified the rapid increase in refugees worldwide as posing a significant challenge to regional development, economic growth and political stability in the twenty-first century, particularly in the 'third world'. In Britain, as in other nations, heated debates about refugees and asylum seekers have recently featured in public discourses about migration, notably in relation to national identity and security. The foregrounding of asylum policy by major political parties during the 2005 U.K. election campaign attests to specific public concerns about this issue, as do more celebratory occasions such as Refugee Week, which showcases community-based cultural events across Britain. While aspects of refugee and asylum seeker migrations have been extensively analysed, notably under the auspices of the ESRC's Transnational Communities Research Programme, specific arts-based research in this field is not well developed, even though the performing and visual arts have been engaging with the topic of asylum for some time, both in Britain and abroad.

A comparative approach to research in this field will enable the analysis of selected U.K. based performance projects in tandem with similar and contrasting praxis elsewhere. Australia is chosen as a site of comparison because its hard-line asylum system has generated a substantial body of activist theatre in this field, in mainstream and community venues. The fact that British politicians have cited Australia's asylum policy as a possible model for controlling refugee numbers confirms the valency of this comparison. In both nations, performance

plays a significant role in increasing public understanding of refugee and asylum seeker issues and addressing local racism fuelled by popular rhetoric linking such groups with terrorism. Applied theatre projects have also provided means by which refugees and asylum seekers can develop strategies for dealing with trauma and adjusting to new locations and communities.

Given that asylum is an urgent global issue and one that is being examined in a number of humanities disciplines, there is also a strong case for connecting with scholars and research-based practitioners working on this topic in other parts of the world. The proposed network will involve key players drawn from interdisciplinary and international contexts, though it will not seek to develop such connections extensively because of budgetary constraints.

Aims and objectives

By facilitating partnerships and information exchange between researchers working in a range of locations and disciplinary contexts, this network will address current debates about asylum and generate new research questions and innovative critical methodologies. The over-arching objective is to extend understanding of the ways in which theatrical performance negotiates the complex and multifaceted topic of asylum and how it might enhance and/or challenge community and government attitudes to refugees and asylum seekers.

Specifically, the network aims to engage with questions concerning:

- 1) *Asylum and Human Rights*: How does performance engage with human rights issues in asylum contexts? Can performance help to address effects of human rights abuses? How do human rights articulate with arts praxis?
- 2) *Asylum and the Ethics of Representation*: What ethical issues arise in/through work with and about refugees and asylum seekers? How can researchers/practitioners work sensitively to explore dialogic performance practices? What are the responsibilities of researchers and practitioners working in such contexts?
- 3) *Refugees and Embodiment*: How do refugees and asylum seekers use embodied performance to fashion 'diasporic selves' and negotiate cultural identities? How are bodies inscribed corporeally in performances by and about asylum seekers and refugees? How do audiences respond in affective and interactive terms when witnessing narratives of bodily trauma?
- 4) *The Spatialities of Asylum Management*: How does performance intervene in the spatial logics of enforced movement and detainment? In what ways do site-specific projects shape representations of asylum and of particular

environments? How do border protection policies restrict international exchange in the performing arts?

The network also aims to develop postgraduate research and set up some of the requisite links for continuing interdisciplinary and collaborative work in this field.

Outcomes

1. Website featuring participants' research, scheduled events, archived e-conversations, and reports of activities. Target audiences are researchers working in the academic, community, government and/or arts-based organisations. Information about website will be circulated electronically.
2. Journal articles (individual/collaborative) by network participants targeted primarily at a scholarly audience and presented in paper/electronic forms.
3. Edited special issue of an international, peer-reviewed journal such as *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *Theatre Research International* or *Borderlands e-journal* (audience and format as above)
4. Oral and performative presentations delivered to a diverse range of academic, professional and practice-based researchers
5. One-day masterclass on performance and asylum, scheduled to coincide with an international conference so as to draw on expertise of visiting delegates. Specific audience is postgraduates/early career researchers in diverse disciplines across Britain.
6. Public performance/workshop/exhibition (with forum discussion afterwards) held in conjunction with Refugee Council events or LIFT (London International Theatre Festival) in 2008 and designed to appeal to the general community. This event is subject to additional funding being secured from arts development bodies.

Duration

The network will initially run for two years beginning 1 January 2006.