

The impact of the refugee crisis: *Lampedusa* by Anders Lustgarten at Liverpool's Unity Theatre

By Joe Mount
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Liverpool's Unity Theatre recently staged *Lampedusa* by British playwright Anders Lustgarten, following a run at London's Soho Theatre. Unity Theatre was founded in 1937 as the "Merseyside Left Theatre," an experimental playhouse accessible to the working class.

The play, directed by Steven Atkinson, dramatises the effects of the refugee crisis from the distinct viewpoints of a fisherman attempting to rescue refugees off the Italian coast and a British student working to make ends meet. The two characters relate their stories alternately on a sparsely decorated set surrounded by the audience seated in three closely spaced concentric circles.

The play opens with fisherman Stefano's reflections on the millennia of prosperous civilisations that have thrived in the rich terrain of the Mediterranean basin. The contemporary reality portrayed contrasts sharply with this image.

Student Denise has "dragged herself" out of a blighted childhood. Outspoken and determined, she works while studying, clutching her dreams of "leaving this dump" and reaching freedom elsewhere. A Conservative-voting individualist, she relates her experiences on the doorstep as a debt collector for a pay-day loans company who makes clear how she is repulsed by the "scum" she deals with daily. She says her work gives her "a real insight into British life," where the only boom sectors are prisons and loan sharks.

Lustgarten shows the devastating social impact of government austerity measures. Denise's disabled and poverty-stricken mother is given a "fit for work" assessment, with tragic results. Despite her prejudices and backward views, Denise befriends a "client" who later goes out of her way to help Denise when she faces hard times.

The sensitive, poetic Stefano describes the grisly

recovery of hundreds of rotten, bloated corpses from the wreckage of flimsy boats, including the tragic shipwreck near the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa in October 2013 which killed 450 people.

He sees that war hits the Middle East and Africa like an earthquake, sending a tsunami of death that washes up on the shores of southern Europe. He grieves, isolated and horrified by the cruelty of European governments. He emotionally distances himself from the refugees, but befriends an African man, conveyed as the embodiment of hope in appalling circumstances, and risks everything to help him.

Both characters are portrayed as complicit, however unintentionally, in the unspeakable brutality of a system they are trapped in and powerless to change. Stefano must sit anxiously watching the clock in the boat station, waiting for his superiors' order to launch a rescue mission while he knows people are drowning just off-shore. Denise forces debt repayments from people who have nothing.

The work is in part a healthy response to a terrible tragedy. Lustgarten's horror and sympathy are shared by many and stand opposed to the corporate media's unrelenting campaign of xenophobia and racism. In Britain, this includes the promotion of the far-right UK Independence Party (UKIP) and outbursts of quasi-fascistic refugee-baiting such as the comments of the *Sun's* Katie Hopkins. Lustgarten can also be praised for attempting to convey the lives and plight of ordinary people. He avoids the self-absorption of many artists.

However, *Lampedusa* fails both to penetrate social reality adequately and to develop entirely convincing characters. The initial self-centred outlook of Stefano and Denise is transformed in each case by his or her

experience of human kindness: those previously seen as a burden must, in fact, be relied upon. The two characters find, through human kindness and solidarity, renewed hope and a semi-religious redemption. This threatens to boil things down to a simplistic morality story, similar to the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The playwright, like many of his artistic counterparts at present, seeks the roots of the refugee crisis and an answer to it in individual behavior and morality. The artists do not yet see a mass oppositional movement in the working class and they are insufficiently endowed with social or historical insight to envision it. As a consequence, almost inevitably, they tend to blame the various populations for what the artists perceive to be indifference or acquiescence.

Are working people by and large callous and indifferent to the plight of refugees? Is the solution to social problems really to be found in simple acts of human kindness?

Stefano is not alone in facing up to the impact of the refugee crisis: millions across Europe are horrified by and opposed to the cruelty of their governments. But one of the great problems is the utter worthlessness of the various parties and unions who still claim to represent workers' interests, but pursue nationalist and pro-capitalist policies. This has had a temporarily paralysing effect.

Denise is portrayed as a right-wing "everyman". Such a social type, shaped by the sensationalism and backwardness encouraged by the tabloid press, certainly exists, but Lustgarten is perhaps a bit too mesmerised by the phenomenon. The genuinely hard-core misanthropic right wing represents a fraction of the population. One is left with the impression that the tabloids are Lustgarten's unreliable source material for his character. In reality, young people are generally sympathetic to the oppressed—and few work as debt collectors.

Apparently trying hard to indict the supposedly uncaring mass of working people, Lustgarten strains to land an emotional sucker-punch. The results are self-consciously grim and claustrophobic. Lustgarten says, "There's a bearing witness in Lampedusa to all the people that have drowned." But this translates into a generally passive reflection of the realities, with prolonged and horrific descriptions that do not shed a great deal of light.

Lustgarten's work, with overly didactic dialogue and action, often resembles a newspaper opinion piece more than a highly developed work of art. He explains in one

interview that, to counter the right-wing media monopoly, his characters are deliberately "left wing." This can lead in the direction of sterile agitprop, with sketchy characters that are vehicles for pre-existing ideas. In this sense, the fisherman Stefano is a more engaging character, while Denise is more tritely "political", though far from left wing.

Lustgarten is clearly a talented artist (he won the 2011 Harold Pinter Playwrights Award), but his works suffer from limitations that affect a broader social milieu.

His profile on the Unity Theatre website declares that he is a "long-standing political activist who's been arrested in four continents" and was involved in the "Occupy" movement. His most recent play *If You Don't Let Us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep*, was set in a dystopian future dominated by neoliberal economics. He claims it "explodes the ethos of austerity and offers an alternative," i.e., by which he means an Occupy-type protest movement.

Lustgarten, however, knows at some level that the politics of Occupy have already failed. He writes of that movement, "initially I found it brilliant. They didn't have demands and were overtly resistant to power... but then after a while you go, 'what the f--- are we gonna do, just sit there and talk process the whole time?'" So I'm ambivalent about what an alternative ideology would look like. In lieu of that, what we really need is a human connection."

The playwright at this point can only offer appeals to a shared humanity while proclaiming his own political pessimism. "We're at a very unique time," he says. "I can't think of really any time since the Industrial Revolution where there hasn't been a viable political alternative to an existing system."

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