

At St. Ann's Warehouse Theater in Brooklyn

The Jungle: A makeshift society within the global refugee crisis

By Owen Mullan
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St. Ann's Warehouse gave its final performance of the play *The Jungle* in Brooklyn, New York, on January 27. Originally written for and performed at the Young Vic in London, *The Jungle* has received positive reviews. When the announcement appeared in July for the upcoming New York production, tickets for the eight-week run at the off-Broadway theater sold out quickly.

The interest around *The Jungle* stemmed from its unique story, about the refugee camp (known as "the Jungle") built in 2015 in the port city of Calais, France, and destroyed the next year by French authorities. Calais has been a destination for refugees since the 1990s when the Channel Tunnel connecting Britain and France was constructed. There have been many refugee camps near the tunnel entrance in France over the decades, successively destroyed by police raids.

Being the only fixed link between Britain and continental Europe, the tunnel provides transport to millions of travelers and millions of tons of freight via trucks annually. Videos of hundreds of young men trying to board these vehicles were circulated in 2014, provoking anti-immigrant hysteria from the British and French media.

The refugee camp was a makeshift settlement in the hills outside Calais, and was named "the Jungle" by the refugees because of the outstanding diversity of and coexistence among the residents, and because of the primitive conditions prevailing there. Up to 10,000 refugees, fleeing war, violence and economic devastation in some two dozen countries, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia and Nigeria, lived in the camp at its peak.

The wave of migration that brought masses of people to Calais in recent years began after the NATO bombing of Libya and the beginning of the Syrian civil war, both in 2011. The first refugees in the Jungle treated in the play began settling in Calais in late 2014, with construction of the camp generally dated to 2015. French riot police burned down the camp and cleared it in October 2016, as part of the government's repressive policies in the aftermath of the November 13, 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris.

Playwrights Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson wrote *The Jungle*

out of their experiences as volunteers at the camp for seven months in 2016. During this period, the two Englishmen helped found the Good Chance Theater, built out of tent materials and tarp, to stage plays and be an artistic and social center at the camp. It was here that the playwrights met three future members of the cast of *The Jungle*: Syrian-born Ammar Haj Ahmad, an actor from Aleppo; Iranian-born guitarist Morin Ghobshah; and Yasin Morado, a martial artist who used to be on the Iranian national team.

The play opens with a clamor as the refugees and volunteers anxiously alert one another to the fact that one of their own has been hit by a car on the highway beside the camp. Amid the chaos, they discover that it is a young boy whom the Afghan men recognize, causing them to lament. A Syrian man, Sala (Ahmad), stands up on the crowded stage and asks aloud, "When does a place become a home?" voicing his experience of having the city he grew up in destroyed.

The Jungle sets up a temporary society in turmoil, where thousands of refugees live in tents practically on top of each other, with dozens of unaccompanied minors, a lack of clean water and waste disposal, very few humanitarian volunteers, and confronting French and British governments that want to expel them.

For the recent production, St. Ann's Warehouse's main stage was converted into an Afghan restaurant, with seating and walls that resembled an eating place in the refugee camp. There was no single stage, but rather connected dinner tables that removed the fourth wall, allowing the actors to move among audience members and into every corner of the theater. The restaurant, where all sorts of social events are held, from public assemblies and funerals to New Year's Eve celebrations and birthday parties, created an appropriate setting for the drama. The audience's seating was divided not into traditional sections, but into groups of nations from which "refugee"-actors could stand up and "speak for their tribe."

The diverse ensemble of 18 actors play characters whose cultural or national differences are sometimes played up to comic effect. No character is one-dimensional and everyone has a slightly different goal in mind for his or her future.

Throughout the piece, forest fires, police raids and deaths send the cast into panic, with each character debating whether to attempt to sneak through the Channel Tunnel or to stay and work to make the Jungle more habitable.

All of these plot points draw from reality at the camp, and a central conflict among the characters is how their small society should be organized. In particular, some want to put up resistance to the French authorities along divisions of ethnic or national lines while others call for unity, with representatives of all the nationalities to “come together, have meetings,” as Sala says.

Murphy, Robertson and the cast, directed by Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin, dive head-first into one of the largest social crises facing humanity in a manner that is self-aware and somewhat testing for the audience. This is brought out in the emotions and energy demanded of the entire cast, whether they play middle-class, English-born volunteers, who are trying to deal with their country’s xenophobic immigration policies, or refugees of civil war in Sudan or Afghanistan, who no longer even have homes.

Every actor seems fully committed to his or her part, and not a moment is wasted on stage. The three members of the cast and the two playwrights who lived in the Jungle camp were successful in adding gravitas to the production.

Throughout the play, there is a dialogue between the refugees and the volunteers on the ability of the latter to fully understand the horrific experiences the refugees have been through.

In one of the most moving moments, Sala, the leader of the Syrian group, tells a 17-year-old Sudanese boy that he can begin to overcome his trauma if he relates his terrible story to one of the English volunteers.

In another, somewhat contrived but expressive moment, every refugee lines up in front of the audience and explains how they all shared many experiences in common, including “dying” multiple times on their journey. The Sudanese boy “died” when he watched his home burn, “died” when he hitched a ride across the Sahara desert, “died” again when he was tortured in a Libyan prison and “died” one last time when he crossed the Mediterranean Sea in an overcrowded, sinking vessel.

The tragedy that concludes *The Jungle* is that the struggle of all the characters, representing thousands of refugees, to maintain peace and unity is swept aside by bulldozers and riot police on October 24, 2016. Ahmad, the native of Aleppo, reflects on this moment, where once again a place that he had made home for himself and others is destroyed and he is forced to flee.

The timing of this production in New York coincided with a major refugee crisis on the US border. An American version of *The Jungle* could easily be written about the migrant caravan that traveled through Mexico in October 2018 and ended at the border-town of Tijuana. The curators at St. Ann’s Warehouse were aware of this. In the event halls outside the theater, there

was a photojournalistic showcase of migrants’ journeys around the world, with images of migrants in warehouses in Sarajevo and others crossing a river in Tijuana.

The Jungle camp in Calais had its origins in the devastation of Middle Eastern, Central Asian and African countries in US- and NATO-led wars. The context in which this play was performed—at the Young Vic in Central London and now in Brooklyn, New York—

was shaped by the events of the past two decades. The production would not hold the same weight for the audiences and critics of both countries were it not for the role of British and American imperialism in creating the conditions that led to Calais, and the current global refugee crisis more generally. It hardly needs to be said that *The Jungle* holds particular significance for residents of New York City, where there are over a quarter-million undocumented immigrants among the millions of other immigrants.

In an interview with *Broadway World*, Murphy and Robertson explained their starting point: “We tried to tell the story of the creation of that society. The decisions that lead people who live there to try to create a structure in peace. The story of that came about and flourished into a place where there were churches, mosques, restaurants, cafés, how the community in that space dealt with big problems and challenges.

“Then, ultimately, the destruction of that society by the authorities. And in the process you find out many of the stories that we encountered—many of the people, the experiences that were reflected into it.”

In 2019, the global refugee crisis is no closer to being resolved than it was in October 2016. The divisions of the masses of refugees are still the same: linguistic barriers, cultural and religious differences, and differences in the type of refuge they seek. Yet, the Jungle camp shows a specific example of the ability of such diverse groups to work together when their struggles for survival are consciously connected. *The Jungle* is a profound production because of the hopeful attitude of its characters, and shows that playwrights and artists don’t need to stray from reality to find stories that encapsulate the best and worst parts of humanity.

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