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Shattered narratives: performing refugee selves in the past, present and future

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ABSTRACT

Refugee experience is underpinned by ongoing waiting. This essay explores how non-linear narrative representations might provide agency and ultimately hope to refugee narratives. It analyses two productions by Phosphoros Theatre, *Pizza Shop Heroes* and *All the beds I have slept in*, and positions performances of refugee selves as a mode of resistance to prevailing asylum narratives. Specifically, it considers how the figure of the ‘unaccompanied minor’ refugee can be reimagined through a temporal engagement with past, present and future. In doing so, refugee actors staging lived experience embody the radical possibility of futurity despite the uncertainty of the asylum system.

KEYWORDS

Refugees; testimony; life narratives; slow violence

Introduction

The circumstances of forced migration create shattered narratives for refugees. Despite this, refugee lived experience is often retold in public discourse in ways that reduce complex socio-political issues to something digestible. In these singular stories, refugees tend to appear as victims, threats or (occasionally) heroes. In media representation these ‘subframes’ emerge as: *humanitarian*, highlighting fragilities and suffering; an *economic, security and symbolic threat* to national cohesion; and *good worker news items* focused on integration, entrepreneurship and so-called success stories (see Gonçalves and David 2025, 8). In this essay I examine performances of the refugee figure, rethinking the ways asylum is conceptualised in public discourse and bureaucratic frames of reference. As a consequence, I argue that refugee voices can be listened to in new ways which are generative of forms of resistance to dominant representations of asylum. I focus my analysis on the life experiences of those who came to the UK as unaccompanied minors, in other words separated children seeking asylum alone, a community who have been routinely overlooked, spoken for, and misrepresented in public and media discourse.

I discuss the work of Phosphoros Theatre (Phosphoros), a company I co-founded in 2015 and remain an Artistic Director of, presenting a close reading of moments in *Pizza Shop Heroes* (2018–20) and a work in progress of *All the beds I have slept in* (2019). At the core of Phosphoros’ work is a desire to reimagine who gets to talk about

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unaccompanied minors, in what way and how. The vision we share as a company is that refugee stories are all around, and through theatre these stories can be amplified and listened to. According to refugee studies scholar Helen Taylor: 'all lives are stories waiting to be told, but the life experiences of refugees are destined to be narrated' (2013, 37). In the moments of performance I discuss in this essay, refugee actors reposition where this narrative authority lies, illuminating what is told and what is narrated, and drive their stories as an ensemble. I argue that the dramaturgies arising stage resistances that challenge the pervasive 'slow violence' (Saunders and Al-Om 2022) of the asylum system.

At the heart of my argument is an exploration of how the dramaturgical construct of the refugee 'figure' can challenge hegemonic representations of unaccompanied minor experience. Building on the idea of resistance, I also interrogate notions of time and temporality, amplifying the potential of non-linearity in asylum narratives and troubling the relationship between waiting and hope. I begin by outlining the theoretical context to my argument, importing ideas from across the humanities including Sara Ahmed's engagement with strangeness, post-Brechtian dramaturgies, and work in migration studies around the limbo of the asylum system. I then begin examining my case studies. First, a section of storytelling in *Pizza Shop Heroes*, which situates the narrative voice amongst a collective of refugee actors as they introduce a composite character of 'the boy', a figure who becomes a conduit for theatricalising multiple overlapping experiences. Next, I look at a moment of testimony emerging in *All the beds I have slept in*, and how the figure of a saviour mobilised new understanding into performing life narratives and how borders might emerge in theatre making processes. I conclude by returning to one of the final scenes in *Pizza Shop Heroes* to look at how the figure of future fathers invited the audience to bear witness to the actors' collective hopes for their older selves, troubling the notion of *heroes* and illuminating the radical possibilities of futurity despite the precarity of asylum and resettlement.

Rethinking 'unaccompanied minor' through performance

The interconnections between a subjective sense of self and the weighty label of 'refugee' are a problematic that reveals the complex political and ethical entanglements of biopolitical control and refugee identity in the twenty-first Century. I am interested in the ways in which Phosphoros engages with these ideas, repositioning where authority lies in refugee narratives. Consequently, when refugees are able to represent themselves in nuanced ways beyond overly simplistic depictions of suffering, described by anthropologist Liisa Malkki as a 'spectacle of a "raw" and "bare" humanity' (1996, 387), what does this mean for the everyday bordering processes that pervade public life? Following recent work in migration studies I adopt the use of 'slow violence' to describe these bordering practices against displaced communities, and position performance practice rooted in an ethic of care as a possible way to respond. The term 'slow violence' was coined by literary scholar and environmentalist Rob Nixon in relation to the attritional violence of the climate crisis which occurs 'gradually and out of sight' (2011). This concept has been developed by migration scholars to describe the ways state powers ensure the 'barest physical survival' of asylum seekers, but nothing else. In other words, the displaced subject is 'kept alive but in a state of injury, for the sake of the life and flourishing of the British public' (Saunders and Al-Om 2022, 7). Slow violence then, is to be understood

as something indirect, discrete, persistent, and hard to capture in headlines. In the UK, slow violence in relation to refugees becomes manifest through legislation such as the Hostile Environment Policy, introduced in 2012 by then Home Secretary Theresa May, which sought to increase scrutiny, restrictions and control over the macro and micro freedoms of asylum seekers, refugees and migrant communities more widely.

The work of Phosphoros, I argue, intervenes in these debates and in doing so reconceptualises the relationship between the performer and the performed. Here, refugee actors are at the centre of a dramaturgical process where their life narratives take on new potency, resisting modes of testifying where experiences of trauma fall under scrutiny with a burden of proof. One way that Phosphoros embeds this approach into its work is through embracing the messiness of life narratives that do not necessarily have resolutions (yet) and sit apart from human rights frameworks. The stories told through Phosphoros' work are not required to hold bureaucratic currency, and instead remain personal, intimate and local. I am reminded of poet and refugee literature scholar Yousif M. Qasmiyeh's description of 'embroidering the voice with its own needle', seeing 'the voice within its owner, as a given and not to be given' (2019). The work I describe in this essay does not *give voice* to refugees, since to do so would suggest prior voicelessness. Instead, I am interested in how co-creation, in its boundlessness, can give rise to meaningful stories, knowledge and interpretation outside of official or evidence-based accounts of asylum. Importantly, unlike the highly scrutinised narratives required by the asylum system that must maintain consistency to be deemed credible, the voices within these performances may be fragmented.

Such issues of representation take on a particular sense of urgency when considered in relation to unaccompanied minors. Forced migration requires a level of resilience beyond what adults let alone children possess, necessitating the ability to survive violent and traumatic circumstances such as imprisonment, kidnapping, torture, bonded labour, physical and sexual violence, trafficking, starvation and dangerous sea crossings. Yet, on arrival to the 'safe' country, any adultification required to pass through these experiences in relative safety must be replaced with a performance of child identity to avoid being treated as an adult asylum claimant. This dual embodiment of toughness and vulnerability puts unaccompanied minors – the majority of whom are boys – in a liminal position as 'flexible discourse users' (Frosh 2001 in Berggren 2014, 245) that 'challenge the very notion of childhood' (Chin 2003). There is a sense of moral panic that has been attached to the mere existence of unaccompanied minors, who are statistically more likely to be young men (around 90%) (see Refugee Council 2021). The experience of the unaccompanied minor young man is seen as incompatible with normative expectations of teenage boys, which triggers a crisis of representation that fuels moral panic, which functions through homogeneity as diversity in their lived experience is obscured, and they are seen collectively as a threat (Herz 2019, 16). Nonetheless, as children, the demand for protection can take on more urgency. These components of unaccompanied minor identity that seem to present conflict represent an ambiguous duality where age as a protective category intersects with gender as a risky category.

I am interested in how the figure of the unaccompanied minor appears as a dramaturgical device within Phosphoros' work, and how this counters depictions of threat as well as the infantilising narratives perpetuated by well-meaning allied professionals: infant, passive and vulnerable: boys who could be *our* sons and grandsons. Instead, as I will examine later, the young men onstage represent versions of themselves that are fluid, evolving, live and

incomplete. This sense of troubling notions of authentic / staged and familiar / unfamiliar bears comparison with post-Brechtian dramaturgies. I draw attention here to Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford's analysis of Rimini Protokoll's theatre of real people and their theorising of 'authenticity-effects' which negotiate 'modes of viewing that involve non-essentialist and non-reductive encounter with (un)familiar people' (2016, 103). In Phosphoros' work there is an acute awareness that the actors' presence onstage is not neutral, and the audience may have a range of expectations and preconceptions arising when booking, arriving or waiting for the show to begin. Michael Balfour describes the inevitability of refugee performance being circumscribed by victimhood, arguing that in these spaces 'narratives of refugees are framed and defined before a word is spoken or gesture made' (2013, 28). These notions of vulnerability and victimhood risk becoming an overshadowing aesthetic, whereby refugee actors are viewed solely through a lens of sympathy rather than recognised as artists in their own right. Tewodros Aregawe, one of the actors from Phosphoros, reflects on this, offering pertinent critique of the audience-performer dynamic:

I believe they have two expectations. The first one is negative, second positive. First one: maybe they've never had an experience seeing refugees as an actor, a performer. They might think 'this show might be rubbish, but let me just support them, let me be part of this activity'. But the positive one ... they might want to know about refugees. The real challenges, the journeys we made. They might come with these ideas, and when they see our play we might change their mind. (Aregawe, rehearsal notes 2019)

His perspective here resonates with media and communications theorist Lilie Chouliaraki's critique of post-humanitarian responses to migration narratives, whereby Orientalist, colonial modes of 'saving' vulnerable others centre on the 'emotionality' of the observer, in what she describes as the 'staging of spectacles of suffering' (2013, 27). Chouliaraki builds on Luc Boltanski's theorising of a politics of pity, whereby suffering is consumed and made readable to those more fortunate, similar to Tewodros' reflections above. Boltanski describes a process of hyper-singularisation that renders complex individual experience depersonalised and over-representative: 'it is he, but it could be someone else: it is that child there who made us cry, but any other child could have done the same. Around each unfortunate brought forward crowds a host of replacements' (1999, 12). This bears comparison with the ways asylum seekers are visualised in media discourse as homogenous masses of anonymous, dehumanised bodies, resulting in the cultivation of fear. Attempts to 'humanise' the refugee figure are clearly complex, and, as Tewodros indicates, can enact ambivalence. These forms of representation occur as refugees move between invisibility and hyper-visibility, where markers of displacement are thrust upon individuals, laden with meaning beyond legalities.

Sara Ahmed's theorising of the stranger is highly relevant here, and I import her argument to frame how Phosphoros uses dramaturgies of the real to resist hegemonic refugee narratives. Ahmed's argument focuses on the social construction of 'strangers', who are positioned as othered within a Western frame of reference, strengthening Western identity and fetishising strangers outside of that, rendering them lacking in agency and power. The stranger, she argues,

Is not simply the one whom we have not yet encountered, but the one whom we have already encountered, or already faced. The stranger comes to be faced as a form of recognition: we recognise somebody as a stranger, rather than simply failing to recognise them (2000, 21).

Phosphoros uses techniques reflective of a post-Brechtian approach to hold a multiplicity of migration experiences, decontextualising specific histories through composite figures which then become recognisable. The consequence of this is that as the unfamiliar becomes closer, the audience's preconceived notions of refugeehood may be challenged.

The construction of the refugee figure is also bound to notions of limbo and bent time. Lisa Malkki describes a 'floating world either beyond or above politics, and beyond or above history - a world in which they are simply "victims"' (1995, 518). The temporariness of displacement is characteristic of forced migration experiences in general, and for unaccompanied minors this is compounded by the already liminal suspension between childhood and adulthood. The temporal uncertainty experienced by unaccompanied minors can be understood as paradoxical, whereby mobility is both the *why* they are waiting, and what they are waiting *for* (see Kohli and Kauko (2018, 491). Refiguring concepts of hope as radical is a central part of my analysis here, and I import ideas from migration studies theorists Kallio, Meier and Häkli who argue that rejecting linear temporalities puts the asylum seeker subject in a formative state of becoming. They argue that "'Hope" instead stands for open-ended future as potentiality, in contrast to future as a set of expectations and set parameters' (2021, 7). I find myself asking: What happens when linear timelines are ruptured, when the refugees' familiar trajectory is made strange? As I argue through this essay, there is a quiet politics at play in Phosphoros' work which results in asylum seekers and refugees reclaiming dignity over how they conceptualise their present circumstances and restoring hope for distant futures. Thus, as past, present and future selves meet, performance of the fragmented self establishes modes of resistance to the slow violence of the asylum system.

Becoming the hero of one's own story

In this section I look at the dramaturgical figure of 'the boy' in Phosphoros' *Pizza Shop Heroes*, revealing an aesthetic dimension to collective authorship that challenges the reductive narratives that leave asylum seekers in a 'floating world' beyond specific histories (Malkki 1995, 518). As a consequence, I argue, the performance reframed the voice of the unaccompanied minor as storyteller and protagonist rather than passive victim. The show was created by Phosphoros in 2018, written by Dawn Harrison and co-directed by Harrison and Pav Christodoulou, and created in collaboration with the four actors: Tewodros Aregawe, Goitom Fesshayee, Emirjon Hoxhaj and Syed Najibi, all of whom had come to the UK as unaccompanied minors and were now in their early twenties. I had a dramaturgical role in making this show, and also featured as an actor, joining the rest of the cast in playing a version of myself: Kate-but-not-Kate. *Pizza Shop Heroes* looked at refugee identity, masculinity, coming of age and future fatherhood, told through an episodic structure based around the precinct of a takeaway pizza shop. It combined direct address, poetry, movement and recorded voice, as well as scenes illuminating the specificity of the unaccompanied minor experience. The show included wry observations of navigating the asylum system, such as the farcical nature of gathering court evidence:

If people have come to your house saying they're going to kidnap you – or kill you – then get them to write it down ... And sign it – on special headed notepaper that says which terrorist group they're from (Phosphoros Theatre 2018)

Additionally, it reflected on notions of welcome: 'things you need to know about coming to the UK': 'Don't eat your food on the train because it gives English people another reason to move away from you' (Phosphoros Theatre 2018). Throughout the show, the construction of the unaccompanied minor bound up in victimhood is continuously challenged and rethought, described by critic Freddie Green in *Broadway Baby* as: 'An exquisite, moving event to witness; you might not fully realise the weight of it until long after leaving the theatre' (Green 2019).

Towards the start of the play, the four actors share a long passage of storytelling depicting the forced migration journey of 'the boy'. The story is told in the third person, evoking the sense of a journey from afar; not Afghanistan, or Ethiopia, Eritrea, or Albania (the actors' countries of origin), but somewhere in between that represents all their histories. The story is broken into sections, represented by scene titles scrawled on pizza boxes. As the actors swap between sections, the next speaker would approach the stage with the scene title, and then after handing over the microphone, the previous speaker would remain next to them, allied onstage as they listened to the next part of the journey. The text, developed by the writer in close communication with the actors, is reflective of their lived experiences: *the boy* is representative of all of them. This was perhaps implicit to the audience, as the actors had established the terms of engagement with them already. In the show's opening, they address the audience, joined by myself, with a set of 'rules' illustrated on a pizza box. After running through a list of housekeeping, like: 'No opening noisy crisp packets; don't film us on your phone; try not to talk when we're acting' (Phosphoros Theatre 2018), the actors share a set of demands to the audience, reminiscent of the sites of testimonial disbelief they are accustomed to:

GOITOM:	Don't stop me half way and ask me to come back in three months.
EMIRJON:	Don't keep asking me when I last spoke to my mother.
TEWODROS:	Don't tell me I don't fit with my psychiatric assessment.
SYED:	You're not here to judge. If we are credible or not.
EMIRJON:	I am not here to make your conscience feel better.
GOITOM:	I don't need you to feel sorry for me.

(Phosphoros Theatre 2018)

In this moment the actors stand before the audience, shoulder to shoulder as a collective, as they set expectations of what their desired engagement looks like. Thus, they disrupt perceptions of how they might be categorised, echoing the impact of 'Authenticity-Effects', which Garde and Mumford describe as making 'what might appear familiar to audiences lose its sense of familiarity and ability to be grasped' (2016, 102). When *the boy* is introduced later, through this lens, the audience are invited to engage at a distance, retaining a level of criticality instead of being overshadowed by an emotive portrayal of suffering. The actors' acknowledgement of the intersubjective encounter resonates with Silvija Jestrovic's question: 'What is it that makes the performance of asylum more powerful than the reality of its subjects?' (2008, 169). It is a meta-theatrical moment where the audience are reminded that the actors hold multiple identity positions at once, and they are in control of what they hold back.

The story starts with *the boy* leaving home, in the scene 'Escape across Tekilo Mountain'. Goitom begins, with the script taking on a Sheherezade-like quality as it depicts his teenage self leaving his village in Eritrea 'under the cover of darkness':

GOITOM:

He ran through the sleeping villages, and as the sun came up he found a place to hide. He travelled like this until the green fields became rocky mountains and still he walked forward – the paths twisting and turning, trying to remember the direction he had come. For four days and four nights he had nothing to eat, nothing to drink. He was afraid to sleep in case he did not wake up.

(Phosphoros Theatre 2018)

Tewodros continues where Goitom ends, as if he is taking on the baton in a relay, as seen in [Figure 1](#). The audience is reminded that the story is at once consequential and fragmented, as *the boy* holds multi-layered experiences of different voices that co-exist. Tewodros' description of the boy escaping from prison is reminiscent of his own experience being imprisoned in Libya. However, instead of adopting a testimonial voice to bear witness to his own suffering, Tewodros was able to observe and interpret the injustice he describes. Intimations of trauma are rewritten using a poetic register: 'The water ran out and the boy thought he was dying again, but one of the men put his hand on him and brought him back to life' (Phosphoros Theatre 2018). Unlike the demands for specificity the burden of proof brings, in this theatricalisation of lived experience he is able to focus on *feeling* rather than accuracy, seen clearly here in the way he evokes the prison: 'At the end of the desert was the worst place on earth. Run by men with no souls, empty men, men who don't know what it is to be human'. There is an echo here of Brechtian estrangement; the figure of *the boy* creates distance between the performer and the performed



Figure 1. Actors from Phosphoros Theatre perform *Pizza Shop Heroes* at Summerhall, Edinburgh. August 2019. Photo: David Monteith-Hodge.

through somewhat decontextualised details, however, this performance of authorship is also generative of a nuanced form of visibility. The audience are invited to watch and listen to Tewodros the actor, rather than bear witness to his suffering. In a five star review of the show in *North West End*, critic Samantha Collett reiterates the impact of this, noting that: 'Even with [a] backdrop of despair, and knowing the experiences are real, this play doesn't dwell. It doesn't turn on the emotional screws and try and force us to care. It shines a light' (Collett 2018). I argue that the visibility of the actors in *Pizza Shop Heroes* as actors and refugees is politically significant and intrinsic to its radical impact, due to the moral panic directed at unaccompanied minors as I have described. Their presence onstage is so unusual in British arts and culture that amplification – or shining a light, to echo the meaning of 'Phosphoros' – is a deliberate act of resistance to the ways knowledge about their existence is secured into dehumanising logic.

Returning to the scene, Tewodros hands Syed the microphone as he takes over the next part of the story. He too describes *the boy's* experience of prison, this time representative of a detention centre in Greece. Here, Syed is figured onstage as an actor, reimagining his past childhood experience of survival through the voice of his adult self in the present. He is at once recognisable as *the boy*, whom Tewodros just embodied, and distinct. Instead of perpetuating victimhood however, he remains the hero of his own story, driving the narrative forward with decision making and discernment:

SYED: For five months the boy was trapped by fences and walls. There were many men imprisoned with him, from different countries. The boy was the youngest, so he listened to them carefully and learned their languages so he could use all the knowledge they had.

(Phosphoros Theatre 2018).

In the development process for these sections, the subject of fingerprints had arisen, and Tewodros had shared how this felt: 'When you get to the land you have to do finger prints. There's no way to escape because it's an island. Sometimes they do fingerprints by force'. When *the boy* has to give fingerprints in order to leave, the mode of performance is folkloric, describing the 'ten little marks that would be his undoing', rather than reproducing this dehumanising act as being steeped in oppression, where children are characterised as criminals. This alternative way of re-enacting the asylum journey speaks to April Shemak's analysis of the narratological quality of asylum, whereby testimony becomes the required mode of engagement, bringing with it 'passwords, shibboleths, watchwords' to constitute a poetics of hospitality (2010, 18). Outside of official formats that strip away personhood, performance of life narratives, I argue, can be generative of agency.

I suggest that through this mode of performance, whereby the dramaturgical figure of *the boy* encompassed multiple experiences through a collective voice, Phosphoros resisted personal narrative as being contingent on asylum speech acts. The use of storytelling in the third person and its ability to position the actors as narrating rather than reliving or testifying their asylum experiences is what made this possible. Shemak argues that 'those seeking asylum must become eloquent, persuasive speakers despite the enormous obstacles that can hinder testimony', (2010, 3) which raises the question of whether theatricalising asylum narratives reproduces this. In *Pizza Shop Heroes*, however, the performers were positioned as driving their narratives on their own

terms, subverting expectations of how refugees may be represented. They are the heroes of their own stories, not the victims.

Messy temporalities and the performance of hope

The next performance I will discuss is *All the beds I have slept in*, which was developed in 2019 as part of my PhD practice research, before Phosphoros expanded it into a full-length production which was performed in the UK between 2021 and 2023, reaching over 3000 audience members, including over 500 refugee youth. Building on my argument about theatre's capacity to reimagine representation of refugee experience, I use this piece to develop my ideas further, examining how performance of the refugee self might explode reductive and bureaucratic narratives, revealing complex politics of authorship, representation and testimonial 'truth'. Rather than focus on the *refugee* figure in this section, I introduce the figure of a saviour, which becomes emblematic of hope and survival, and extends my exploration of shattered refugee temporalities. The version of the show I detail here is an experimental work-in-progress performance which was shared at the 2019 'Collisions' Festival at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. Following on from *Pizza Shop Heroes*, I worked with the same actors: Goitom, Emirjon, Tewodros and Syed. The semi-fictionalised narrative blended personal testimony with movement, recorded voice and semi-autobiographical scenes depicting how help from strangers and friends propelled the actors forward on the next stage of their journeys. Starting in the bedroom of a semi-independent accommodation in London, the stories visit various borderscapes: the Calais 'jungle', a detention centre in Greece, a train station, and, as I will examine later in this section, the Mediterranean sea. The stage had two single beds positioned on it, evoking the intimacy of a shared London bedroom in foster care. In between scenes there were sections of voiceover where the actors listed the places they had slept:

My bed in Albania, double sized and very comfy.

A blanket in the rescue ship that pulled me from the sea.

A charpai on top of my roof in Afghanistan when it was too hot to sleep inside.

In a hostel on my first day in UK.

In a broken-down hire car in Addis Ababa so that thieves wouldn't steal it.

A big King Size bed in my very own flat. (Phosphoros Theatre 2019)

At the core of *All the beds I have slept in* was a desire to refocus how we think about care in relation to refugee youth. Looking beyond the institutionalised care apparatus of the state, the show revealed care as interdependent and mutually encountered across and within newly arrived communities of young people. This was inspired by reflections on the solidarities and friendships experienced by the actors, formed across hostel corridors, English learning classrooms, youth groups, barber shops, social media and on the street. These encounters have formed allyship in the absence of fit for purpose intervention from the government, in the context of high levels of poor mental health, risk of destitution, social isolation and often lack of access to work or education. The show also looked at

complicated moments of care, such as a kind detention guard or border official, repositioning the once teenager as onstage storyteller as they reimagine experiences within a theatrical frame. Thus, the piece contested where narrative authority lies and how refugee stories are tightly controlled, along with many other aspects of their daily lives. For unaccompanied minors this is put under pressure further, as immigration and social services collide, and the state becomes a faceless instrument of care.

The story I tell here comes in two parts, and led me to insights about how borders emerge in theatre making processes, and how, as artists, we can resist them. It is the story of Tewodros as he crossed the sea in a dinghy, only making it to shore after being rescued by a larger boat, facilitated by an elusive figure, who he described as an angel. Tewodros started his story on the Mediterranean, where he hoped to get far enough away from Libya to escape the torturous prisons he had fled. He told us about the boat: 'There were more than 120 people. The boat was 7 metres long, and was pumped plastic with different colours - some silver, some orange' (Aregawe, rehearsal notes 2019). He was joined by other refugees from Syria, Tunisia, and, like him, East Africa. Someone on the boat tried to call the coastguard to seek safe entry at the port of Sicily, but these systems do not always function to protect. So the driver of the boat called another number, keeping his phone dry from the waves in a plastic bag, hoping to get hold of a man they know as *Abba Mussie*. A stranger, representing a beacon of hope for the passengers. Tewodros' memory was both fragmented and lucid:

Abba Mussie speaks for the Italian government. I don't actually know who he is, whether he works for the government. I think he does. We only know his voice. Everyone knows about him - he's well known amongst people who come on this journey. He speaks 6 or 7 languages - Tigrinya, Amharic, Arabic, English ... Most people don't speak English so he helps. Abba Mussie asks lots of questions. 'Are there any pregnant women? Any kids?' He asks for details - how many people, the colour of the boat, and who is on board.

I didn't speak to him - only the driver does.

After the call, you wait for 10 min and then the people come in a bigger boat, or a helicopter like an aeroplane. One by one they pick you out of the small boat and put you in the bigger boat, and it takes you to Lampedusa or Sicily. (Aregawe, rehearsal notes 2019)

As we sat in a rehearsal room and listened to Tewodros' testimony, Goitom shared that *he too* had Abba Mussie to thank for his safe passage. The two men, both from East Africa, were sure that we must include this story in the show we were trying to create, because it would speak directly to those who had made the same journey as them, and recognise their experience too; they identified the power of shared memory within a disparate community. They reiterated that the identity of Abba Mussie remained unknown to them: 'No one knows Abba Mussi by face - you don't actually see him. His name is passed around. You know that if you need help you call that number. You call Abba Mussie (Aregawe, rehearsal notes 2019).' Despite the enigmatic nature of this figure, neither Tewodros nor Goitom had tried to work out who this man was, yet they both described him as an 'angel' who saved their lives. They suggested that Abba Mussie could in fact have been five or ten different men, and 'Abba Mussie' may not have even been his real name. I was fascinated by the story of this stranger; a saviour-like figure who long existed in their memories, yet had never emerged in any other explorative work we had done together. After the session, we searched online to see if this *Abba Mussie*

figure was linked in any way to the Italian coastguard system. Our dramaturg Pav discovered that actually, many people knew Abba Mussie ‘by face’, as he had been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize in 2015. His name is Father Abba Mussie Zerai, and he is an Eritrean priest living in Switzerland. He answers ‘distress calls’ throughout the day and night from desperate migrants who have found his phone number ‘scrawled across the wall in a Libyan detention centre’ (Burke 2015), and also further afield, as far as Indonesia and Cambodia. Tewodros and Goitom looked at a photograph of Father Abba Mussie Zerai and they were faced with the stranger that had saved them. Zerai is quoted in NBC saying: ‘Why am I an activist? Because I say these people [are] like me’ (2015). Building on Sara Ahmed’s work, what I observed here was Tewodros and Goitom *encountering* Abba Mussie anew, which brought the possibility of both surprise and conflict. Ahmed questions: ‘How does identity itself become instituted through encounters with others that surprise, that shift the boundaries of the familiar, of what we assume that we know’ (2000, 7). The angelic figure they had long memorialised in their pasts could be understood in the present. As I watched Teddy and Goitom’s amazement as they looked back at an Eritrean elder, I wondered how this new information – an unexpected twist – might impact their relationship to their experience of salvation, and which version we would explore onstage, if any.

Returning to the rehearsal room, the dramaturgical approach I facilitated following the emergence of the figure of Abba Mussie engaged with both the ethics and aesthetics involved in performing the self. Reflecting back on *Pizza Shop Heroes*, the figure of the boy had emerged through collective voice as the actors shared narration of a singular story. I was keen to explore how we could restage and reinterpret Tewodros’ encounter with the figure of Abba Mussie, and bring in the other actors whilst doing so, recognising the potential of speaking beyond their own lived experience. The epic and exceptional details we had discovered were inspiring and evocative of a grand – yet invisible – gesture of care that excited me as a theatre maker. As I read more about Father Abba Mussie Zerai, I thought about how some of the facts about the scale of his intervention could be woven into the narrative; how far his quiet promise of help had travelled – to Indonesia and Cambodia and now a rehearsal room in London. However, I realised that shifting focus in this way would detract from the mythic status this man had held in the minds of Tewodros and Goitom for several years. Dee Heddon situates the self as relational, critiquing the appeal to ‘tell the truth’ or ‘say it correct’ as problematic, appealing to a ‘knowable, fixed subject’ (2008, 151). When Tewodros had been on the boat in the dark black water, alone but for 120 others, it had not occurred to him to think about the man behind the phone. He represented an angelic figure, a sort of divine intervention that could transcend the cynical exchanges of remunerated help which had betrayed him and the others on the boat. In the past, *Abba Mussie* represented hope, and in the present, that hope emerges as resistance to the slow violence of the border.

Collectively, then, we told the version as Tewodros had remembered it, bringing the other actors in to share the story, speaking beyond their own experiences as they enacted mutual care. The four actors use a bed frame as a dinghy, as seen in [Figure 2](#), turning the ordinary into something unfamiliar. The binary of self and other was troubled as they reflected on hierarchies of human suffering as a collective, staging a political moment of solidarity with each other, those who are still in transit, and those who came before. The following dialogue is taken from Scene 8:



Figure 2. Actors from Phosphoros Theatre perform *All the Beds I Have Slept In* Script-in-Hand at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama. September 2019. Photo: Holly Revell.

- EMIRJON: I don't know how old he is, or what he looks like, he is just a voice.
 GOITOM: He is speaking, shush ...
 SYED: But all voices are not the same. Some do not see us as equal, human. Some do not even pick up the phone.
 TEWODROS: Does he know what he does for us? The difference he makes? That he saved my life?
 ALL: (IN OWN LANGUAGES) This is Abba Mussie. How can I help?
 TEWODROS: (ENGLISH) This is Abba Mussie. How can I help? (Phosphoros Theatre 2019)

I reflected on why I had been curious about the 'true' story of who Abba Mussie was; my hope, I think, was for a factual version of what I perhaps initially heard as a disjointed account. But to re-animate the self-authored story Tewodros had offered was to share the version that was real to him, and these dramaturgical decisions resist researched 'truth' in favour of collective and affective remembering. Further, it made possible the creation of a performative moment that bore witness to Tewodros' own memory of Abba Mussie, capturing the idea of this person's significance, and what he meant to him.

On reflection, perhaps this story was not about Father Abba Mussie Zerai at all, but how the *figure* of Abba Mussie radically changed Tewodros, awakening an obligation to reciprocate the care he had encountered from a stranger he could never thank. Through this moment of practice, my role as a practice researcher was stretched and changed, as I navigated alternative ways of making sense of the experiences spoken about, which made me

rethink engagement with the 'real'. In *Human Rights and Narrated Lives* (2004) Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith discuss the ways narratives of suffering become reduced as they become bound up in the 'messiness' of a negotiation of the tense relationship between aesthetics, commerce and politics. They argue:

The pressure to conform the 'messiness' of personal testimony to the protocols for codification of a human rights abuse, to contain it within a standardised, often chronological, format that more easily addresses the series of questions the inquiry has established as critical to the goal of documenting a particular human rights issue, subsumes local knowledge and conceptual frameworks for understanding different cultural experiences and traditions to the national and international frameworks of human rights law. (2004 Schaffer and Smith, 37)

Considering these complexities, it is also worth acknowledging that the dramaturgical device of the boat crossing is not without critique. Emma Cox and others have critiqued the dehistoricising effect of 'liquid imagery'; boat crossings wash clean complex and specific histories leaving generic 'migrants' behind (Cox et al. 2019, 7). In this scene, however, the narrative of the boat crossing is complicated and distinct from those usually confined to bureaucratic discourse. Unlike a generic idea of the sea, the figure of Abba Mussie offers a different kind of dramaturgical value. Yet, the political potential of this figure sits beyond specific border spaces and geographies, and embodies a different form of deterritorialisation that opens up possibilities of resistance to border regimes. The reflections I share here on the creative process, which were not visible to the audience, also serve as a reminder that refugee life narratives are not fixed, and by unbinding them from the burden of proof and other bureaucratic restrictions they can be embraced as messy and imbued with multiple forms of meaning. Both versions of Tewodros' story account for what happened on the sea, however the performance in *All the beds I have slept in* honoured the perspective of Tewodros' past teenage self, retold in the present.

Distant fathers and the radical possibilities of futurity

So far in this essay I have explored collective approaches to authorship within refugee theatre, looking at how the refugee figure emerges as a result of this shared mode of storytelling that can bend time and be dislocated, thereby becoming both strange and familiar. Through this I have argued that the performance of life narratives can form resistance to ways in which unaccompanied minors are represented in public and bureaucratic discourses. Central to my analysis have been two different approaches to testimonial performance, both of which centre on aspects of the forced migration experience that might be described as somewhat familiar in the public's imagination. Recognising the prominence of these 'journey' narratives so far, it is important to bring to light alternatives, so that these are not the *only* stories told about refugees. Asylum experiences tend to be reduced to the singular moment of the 'journey', which risks flattening out diverse experiences into something digestible and comprehensible, and also risks obscuring the impact of what comes next, described here as the slow violence of everyday bordering practices. In this section I return to *Pizza Shop Heroes*, examining how Phosphoros departs from staging lived experience and looks towards possible future narratives, which I argue becomes transgressive as asylum temporalities are radically rethought. The first extract comes towards the end of the play, and involves the four actors and myself sitting on

top of a piece of set resembling a pizza shop counter. Using direct address, they reel off a list of dates in the future and predict what their lives might look like. As an ensemble, we listen to the personal and professional achievements and react with a combination of laughter, pride, and incredulity at the suggestions, which range from somewhat ordinary, for example:

EMIRJON: 2019 – Emirjon passes his Level 2 electrical course.
 GOITOM: 2019 - Goitom passes his GCSE Maths and English.
 SYED: 2020 - Syed starts an engineering degree at University. (Phosphoros Theatre 2018)

To a more heightened, technicolour version of the future, which also reminds the audience that the individuals in front of them have their own artistic ambitions:

EMIRJON: 2025 – Emirjon gets his first part in a major action movie.
 GOITOM: 2025 - Goitom's band Wehazit becomes very famous and he earns enough money to buy his own restaurant. (Phosphoros Theatre 2018)

As the actors react to each other's predictions, their enduring friendships are also suggested, as they cheer Goitom when his girlfriend accepts his marriage proposal, for example. In a five-star review of the show in *The Skinny*, critic Alice Lannon remarks on how the actors create 'a picture of wholesome, non-toxic masculinity: a much-needed antidote to hateful headlines in the current political climate' (Lannon 2019). However, as the years progress and the stakes increase, it becomes apparent that the hopes and dreams of the actors onstage remain bound in injustices caused by the slow violence of international border control and its long-lasting consequences. Originally staged in 2018, the following line from Syed projects almost a decade into the future and serves as a reminder of the languishing sense of waiting intrinsic to the experience of refugees broadly and asylum seekers specifically:

SYED: 2027 – Syed gets his British passport and reunites with his family in Kabul. (Phosphoros Theatre 2018)

In these moments where the audience were confronted with fragile possibilities of hope I was struck by how politicised youthful dreams become when staged by refugees. Critically, the barriers to their futures are enduring and changeable as a direct result of their displacement. At the time it was performed, for example, only 1% of refugees worldwide had progressed into higher education (UNHCR),¹ so Syed's ambition of an engineering degree is both highly politicised and extremely unstable.² On the journeys the actors took as separated children they had little agency, but, as the performance illuminates, the paths they are on now are more within their control. Performance therefore becomes a mode through which to envision the future both in terms of the exceptional and the ordinary. I return to the concept of radical hope here, which speaks to the way asylum seekers and refugees can mobilise hope as open-ended and not bound in chronological markers, which, according to Kallio, Meier and Håkli, erases recognition of subjective truths and difference by viewing time as ahistorical, disembodied and objective' (2021, 4). Instead, they argue, asylum temporalities can encompass open-ended futures and potentiality where time is 'lived, experienced and (re)made through a person's location, positionality and experience' (4). This renegotiation of time can be seen in *Pizza Shop*

Heroes, where the actors resist pre-written outcomes and endings to their stories and shattered temporalities are reassembled. Sitting casually on the set, it almost felt like a post-show debrief, as the realness of their timelines became apparent and compelling. Further, in this moment, the notion of a 'hero' narrative is upended as the actors exceed their pre-written outcomes and project into the future with hope.

As the production comes to an end it continues to radically rethink asylum temporalities, and a third figure is introduced: the child. Throughout *Pizza Shop Heroes*, shared experiences of the past are restaged in the present, alongside collective hopes for the future. After hearing the possible trajectories of the actors the audience are now able to see them play out, in a scene that illuminates the liberatory potential of a future unbound by borders. Advancing to 2040, the scene sees the four friends return to the pizza shop they once worked in to catch up about work and family life. Goitom, now a successful musician, is in a leopard print fur coat; Tewodros, star of stage and screen, dons stylish sunglasses; engineer Syed is in a smart suit jacket and entrepreneur Emirjon wears a flat cap. The scene is funny, satirising intergenerational dissonance:

EMIRJON: So how's the electrical business?

SYED: Yeah – good –

TEWODROS: Has your boy joined you yet? 'Syed and son' ...

SYED: (EMBARRASSED) He says he wants to have a gap year. Go travelling with his friends.

GOITOM: A gap year?? Go travelling - and who's paying for this?

SYED: He's going to busk on the streets, with his sitar.

GOITOM: He's a beggar??

SYED: A busker.

GOITOM: Begging, busking, all the same.

SYED: He won't listen to me - says I am the capitalist patriarchy.

TEWODROS: (SHAKES HEAD IN DESPAIR) These children. (Phosphoros Theatre 2018)

In this imagined reality, money earned is spent on travelling rather than paying back debts and keeping distant family afloat. Despite their exasperation, these fathers' children have choices and freedom. In the context of unaccompanied minors, this future is utopian. They were too young to leave their families, *but they did*. The scene continues, and there is a refrain to the start of the show as Tewodros brings up the 'journey':

SYED: English was my fifth language. My son's only got two. He says what's the point in learning any more?

GOITOM: 'What's the point, what's the point ...'

ALL: (SHAKING THEIR HEADS) These children ...

TEDDY: I was telling my son about my journey - and he sighed -

GOITOM: Sighed?

TEDDY: And said to his sister - 'here Dad goes again.' (Phosphoros Theatre 2018)

In this glimpse of the future, the piece continues to resist and complicate the actors' personal narratives. Hearing about Tewodros' children being bored by *yet another* retelling of his story of displacement both refuses to uphold a trope of romanticisation and also suggests a future for their children so far away from immigration precarity that their fathers' histories become lore way beyond their grasp. The figure of the child that emerges here is surprising and contributes to a rejection of victim narratives that are commonly written into refugee identities and futures. Departing from themes of survival, loss,

and a fight for recognition of their subjectivity, there is a satisfying yet bitter-sweet comic relief at the bewilderment the fathers experience as their teenage children forge their own destinies. In their futures, visioned onstage, their children are granted freedoms they never had. Thus, in *Pizza Shop Heroes*, the figure of the 'hero' becomes ironic. Consequently, the characterisations of the actors as slightly embarrassing dads who are no longer unfamiliar or figured as *strangers* are perhaps the most radical aspect of the show.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have explored how a collaborative theatre practice with refugee actors can generate alternative ways of narrating lived experience that radically rethink both the refugee as victim and the concept of stuck time. I have examined moments from Phosphoros' *Pizza Shop Heroes* and *All the beds I have slept in*, which mobilise these ideas in practice. I have developed an argument around the presence of the 'figure' in these pieces, which enacts an alternative representation of unaccompanied minors, whose lived experiences are routinely overlooked, and whose voices are seldom included when they *are* spoken about. Importantly, the figures I have mentioned are never seen, only imagined. The actors stage the figure through their words: *the boy* as a composite; Abba Mussie as a saviour who shifts from stranger to being known; the children they will one day nurture but who do not exist yet (as seen in Figure 3). They never embody these figures, yet through encompassing multiple experiences and voices, they exist as echoes of the pasts, presents, and futures of the actors onstage. It is in this way, I argue, that the audience feels a sense of proximity with the *real* versions of the four



Figure 3. Actors from Phosphoros Theatre perform *Pizza Shop Heroes* at Summerhall, Edinburgh. August 2019. Photo: David Monteith-Hodge.

men: the actors onstage who become closer through performing their messy, incomplete, ever-evolving, complicated, and multi-dimensional selves.

These dramaturgies of displacement demonstrate how performance can enact resistance to the slow violence of the asylum system. Through staging and restaging their lived experience, Phosphoros' ensemble explore what it means to embrace and problematise the stickiness of the label of 'refugee' and find new ways to engage with a temporal reassembly of past and future. In this final line of dialogue from Tewodros, towards the end of *Pizza Shop Heroes*, these ideas are mobilised, as he reflects on how his identity is embodied through a family lineage, not defined solely by his migration experience, but shaped by it:

TEWODROS: When you make a child it is like moulding metal. They bear the imprint of everything that has gone before. From my father and his father's father, in a chain that goes right back to the very beginning. Everything they learned, the struggles that shaped them – it has become part of me. (Phosphoros Theatre 2018)

Notes

1. As of 2025 this statistic is now recorded at 7% (UNHCR 2023). In the UK this is a result of work by organisations such as Refugee Education UK, Student Action for Refugees, the City of Sanctuary Network and the rise of scholarships and bursaries for asylum seekers and refugees.
2. During the run of the show Syed received a full scholarship from Queen Mary University of London to study a Sustainable Energy Engineering degree, and later a Masters in Engineering, from the Article 26 scholarship for asylum seekers. This update was written into the script, reflecting the liveness of events unfolding.

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Ethics

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