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RESEARCH ARTICLE



'Not just theatre, also politics, law': on dramaturgical ethics and collective playwriting in Deportation Centre Sjælsmark

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the ethics and process of writing and performing the play *This Is Us* with a group of rejected asylum seekers from Deportation Centre Sjælsmark in Denmark. Positioned within larger frameworks of political and media hostility, the group pushed for a more radical approach of 'not just theatre', but called instead for solidarity within and beyond moments of collective writing. From this process, 'dramaturgical ethics' arose as an aesthetic and ethical practice, which can support thinking through responsibilities and relationalities involved in research, theatre making and entering into the world together.

KEYWORDS

Dramaturgical ethics;
asylum; refugee; playwriting;
collective writing

Between September 2018 and January 2019, I go to Deportation Centre Sjælsmark every week to write a play, *This Is Us*, with a group of rejected asylum seekers living there. Sjælsmark (literally translated as 'Souls' Field') is located behind a fence about an hour and a half via public transport Northwest of Copenhagen and houses roughly 250 asylum seekers whose cases have been rejected by the Danish government. I have come to Denmark on fieldwork as part of my PhD project, a study of what home and belonging mean in the wake of the so-called 'refugee crisis'. As a playwright and researcher, I am interested in what plays written with refugees and asylum seekers can do with the questions of home amid polemic debates, but also how theatre, with its poetic possibilities of creating worlds and producing social, communal moments, can perhaps rethink approaches to belonging and asylum. While I am drawn to ask critical questions about belonging in this context due to my Danish nationality, I also volunteered with a local refugee community organisation, Trampoline House, prior to my PhD. The residents in Sjælsmark and the other surrounding camps are the main users of the house, which is also one of the key sites of resistance to anti-immigration policies in Denmark. Trampoline House asks radical questions about democracy, integration and belonging while providing core services to its users, like legal advice, language classes and medical and psychological counselling. Apart from obtaining an institutional ethical approval from my

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university, partnering with the house provided the infrastructure of support for the participants, as well as opportunities for meeting outside the camp.

This article offers up 'dramaturgical ethics' through the case study of writing the play *This Is Us* with the group in Sjælsmark. I ground this exploration in the ethical, experienced and political dimensions of the lives of the participants by taking my cue and title from Payman, a participant and resident in Sjælsmark. In the first session, Payman explained that he had spoken to journalists, writers and artists before, and while their work might have been made richer or deeper by his participation, nothing had changed in Payman's life. He therefore insisted: 'if you can help, you should help. Not just theatre, also politics, law'. Within radically different understandings of what the so-called 'refugee crisis' is a crisis of (Jeffers 2012; Cox and Wake 2018; Weiwei 2018), Alison Jeffers suggests that 'the treatment of refugees can be taken as a kind of ethical measure with which to assess the degree of hospitality or largesse shown by a nation towards the stranger' (2012, 6). Thinking of Payman's approach as a component of this ethical measure highlights the scope of dramaturgical ethics, covering at once the ethics of artistic expression involved in theatre making with and about refugees, the call for reflective positionality when people occupy different legal status in the project, and the imperative to practice solidarity within and beyond moments of making theatre together. Although the link between dramaturgy and ethics has received considerable attention (e.g. Read 1993; Ridout 2009), dramaturgical ethics draws out this connection in three key ways: firstly, through Emer O'Toole, Andrea Kristić and Stuart Young's (2017) exploration of dramaturgy through the lens of Levinasian ethics, as a practice which is inherently ethical and able to make us visible to one another. Secondly, by addressing how dramaturgy is able to attend to a wide scope of dramatic and worldly composition. Focussing specifically on representations of migratory experiences, Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny's (2020) work suggests that dramaturgy and ethics extends to asking critical questions of self and other. Lastly, I consider the negotiations of positionality between the participants as key components of dramaturgy and ethics. In the context of this article, I draw mostly on the work of the Australian-based organisation, RISE: Refugees, Survivors and Ex-Detainees, Taiwo Afolabi's ethical questioning, Silvija Jestrovic' notion of hyper-authenticity and James Thompson's work on applied theatre. I place Payman's call for positionality solidarity within and beyond the framework of making theatre together exactly as a call to dramaturgical ethics alongside similar proposals like James Thompson's 'aesthetics of care' (2015; Stuart Fishers and Thompson 2020), where performing care is not separate from artistic endeavours, but rather provides its own aesthetics and relational approaches.

This Is Us

Having a history of volunteering at Trampoline House, I was able to gain access to Sjælsmark. In collaboration with a Red Cross Worker in the camp, I met Rohan who had been looking for opportunities to write and act. Together, we gathered a group of people who were interested in the project. The fluctuating number of participants as well as Payman's call above made clear the need for a process rather than performance-driven approach. As in Trampoline House, people would come and participate as they could, depending on a range of factors from how they were feeling that day to what was happening with their

cases, in their home countries, and in Sjælsmark. In an interview conducted at the end of the fieldwork, Rohan reflected on the difficulty of committing to a creative process in their situation, even when wishing to: 'you never know how long you will stay. So you cannot plan. Maybe you are writing one day, and the next day you are leaving' (Interview, 17th December 2018). Starting the process not from my own artistic intent, but instead from the awareness of people's situations is the beginning of dramaturgical ethics. For example, in the first weeks, I would bring writing exercises which were open enough for people to engage with, and could build towards a longer play, but not dependent on a specific kind of participation.

The group made concrete, ethical and relational work of academic and theoretical thought. Their reflections shape the imperatives I put forward here, which leads to a few structural choices in this article: while the scholars I cite are mostly from the Global North, the monologues from *This Is Us* preambles most sections below, and the words and lived experiences of the participants are placed equally and at alongside scholarship and at the centre of this article's exploration.¹ I will first introduce the practices and politics of Sjælsmark as they were in 2018, then I will reflect on dramaturgy, ethics and refugee performance before introducing dramaturgical ethics. Lastly, I will read elements of *This Is Us* through a lens of dramaturgical ethics, debating also how the play and the participants made deliberate choices to resist the refugee narrative. While this article strives to be a contribution to developing research on refugee, performance and collective playwriting, the language and structure will veer away from more traditional scholarship at times. This happens, most notably, in the conclusion (or lack thereof), which seeks to leave the reader with open questions and in the middle of the ongoing problem the makers of the play are in.

Sjælsmark: *This Is Us*, 'We are not trees!'

Each human on earth has born in a different place, you can call it a country, kingdom, land, it doesn't matter. it happens randomly, without any kind of willing or choosing. [...]

Then, for some reasons out of our control mostly, it happened that some of us became under big dangerous situations on their land, it could be war, persecution, starvation etc ... therefore, as human beings, with the ability of surviving and to stay alive, we choose to leave, to another secured place, in our big land, because we are not trees!

(Excerpt from scene 2, by Abbas, Sjælsmark 2018)

In a study commissioned by the Freedom of Movement Research Group and Roskilde University, researchers looked into the conditions for the people living in Deportation Centres Sjælsmark and Kærshovedgård. In their report entitled *Stop Killing Us Slowly* (Suárez-Krabbe, Lindberg, and Arce-Bayona 2018), they contextualise how the deportation centres were established as part of the Danish government's tightening of the asylum laws, and were designed to pressure the rejected asylum seeker to give up and leave Denmark willingly. The conditions in the centre reflect this motivation accordingly, as direct measures were taken to make the impermanence of their situation clear to the residents. The report includes procedures such as: geographical isolation of the centres with poor public transport connections; no subsidies from the state; no right to work or

education (or other so-called 'meaning-giving activities'); having to report to authorities several times a week; a constant threat of being jailed; limited access to medical care and no legal aid before the person's asylum claim has been rejected.

Many of the residents are in a 'fastlåst udsendelsesposition' ('locked leaving position'), which means the asylum seeker is in a limbo between staying and leaving. In many cases, people collaborate on their own deportation, but are caught in lengthy and bureaucratic procedures awaiting the processing of their return by their home country or the country they have fingerprinted in under The Dublin Regulations. Even when having a well-founded fear of return, and despite rules of non-refoulement (UNHCR 1951), rejected asylum seekers risk being sent to Ellebæk detention centre if they are perceived as non-collaborative. The reasons for refusing deportation vary. In some cases, authorities and governments have deemed countries safe to go back to through often brief diplomatic procedures that cannot grasp the complexities of situations of the country in question and fail to take into account the individual case or motif for leaving in the first place. Some refuse simply because the alternative and potential for a future is worse for themselves and their children.

Residents often compared Sjælsmark to a prison, an unsurprising observation considering that Kriminalforsorgen (the Prison and Probation Service also operating the Danish prison system) manages the daily running of the centre. In some cases, the residents and supporting activist stated that the conditions are even worse in deportation facilities than they are in Danish Prisons (Hergel 2017a, 2017b, 2019). Sjælsmark then criminalises and unhomes its residents both in design and execution, which is further underscored by the media output and political intent of producing an unwelcoming atmosphere and elongating the waiting process of the people living in deportation centres.

During a succession of two right-wing governments seated between 2015 and 2019, anti-immigration initiatives won steady ground in Denmark. For one, the former minister for immigration, integration and housing Inger Støjberg, (from the right-wing Party Venstre) publicly stated that they were aware that their initiatives were pushing the limits of The Human Rights Declaration and Refugee Convention, but these were necessary measures for the welfare of the state (Kjersgaard and Debatten 2019). There was also the much contested Lindholm Ø, a suggestion for placing certain demographics of refugees on an island outside of Sjælland (Abend 2019), seeking to mirror the Australian off-shore detention facility, Manus Prison. The political language surrounding these initiatives and laws all argued that the people arriving from other countries (most often singling out those from Middle Eastern and African countries) pose a direct threat to the value system that Danes and Denmark operate within. These measures form a part of an overarching 'shift in paradigm' in Danish foreign politics manifesting, overall, in targeted amendments in integration and refugee policy. For example, in 2018, the DPP ruled on granting refugee status only on a temporary basis and significantly dropping the subsidies given to people in the system (Korsgaard 2018).

In *This Is Us*, the participants wanted to talk about Sjælsmark and the Danish political climate, while resisting the way they were narrated by the system. *This Is Us* ended up being twofold: there was a story following two politicians in an ideological battle over the tightening of asylum laws. One of them does not like refugees and has built his career on the defence of national, traditional values. These scenes were interspersed with monologues and stories written by individual members of the group, addressing

life in the camp, who they were before and who they wanted to be. This dialogical structure thereby reverses who does the formulaic telling of whom. Taking inspiration from the political climate in Denmark and around the world, the story of the politicians was reduced to an interpersonal vie for power, while the nuances of the play are reserved for the monologue. Abbas' monologue above reflected these dynamics, and spoke to the participants' observations that they often thought Danes and Europeans considered themselves better people simply because of nationality, without taking into account, as Abbas writes, that nationality 'happens randomly, without any kind of willing or choosing'. Hasan echoed this in a session where he wrote: 'we are losing our dignity by facing such inhumane rules. Sorry! If we cannot maintain the reputation that Denmark is a country of happiest people on earth when we are outside and smile doesn't exist on our face' (transcribed from Worksheet on page 19). The group understood that people who were not asylum seekers thereby reserved the right to be seen as a person first, whereas the group in Sjælsmark were constantly framed by the camp, the media, the politicians as carrying the identity only of an asylum seeker or refugee. They shared experiences of the system being geared against them and impossible to operate within, of being generalised and judged without being listened to. They also remarked of being criminalised in spite of having done no crime other than coming to a democratic country to create a better, safer life for themselves because – they are not trees.

Dramaturgy, ethics and refugee performance

I asked you for help, and you judged me by my name.
 I said I want peace, you said I am a rebel terrorist.
 I told you I am open to new ideas and all types of human beings
 You told me there is no place for me, that I come from a dark background.
 But then I asked what now?
 You told me to hold on a second so you can think.

Pause

But let me tell you something. You were born here. Your country helped you.
 [...]

 Meanwhile, I was somewhere else. My country did not help me, it helped its owners. I became who I am because I fought for it everyday, I fought to stay a good person.
 My society kicked me away. My society neglected me. My family wanted me to be like society and I told them no because I wanted to be more like you.
 [...]

 And when I told you about all this, you turned away, telling me this is not your fault. Not your responsibility.
 Don't worry, I am not going to say that you are selfish or committing a crime, because if I do you will stop listening.
 So I am going to let you conclude it.

Pause

But it has been a lot more than just a second.
 (Excerpt from scene 4, by Rohan, Sjælsmark 2018)

Rohan's monologue was written from an exercise where everyone selected a theme from the worksheet (see 19), and wrote about it as if they were writing a letter to a Danish person. Through writing, we imagined a exchange where there often is none, while

shifting the dynamics of how such a dialogue works. Through their letters, the group were the ones to decide what to tell and how to go into dialogue with an imaginary Danish person rather than the one who is typically on the receiving end of such an address. Rohan's writing uses the framing and duration device of 'give me a second' to recount how national and international systems home and unhome people unequally, thereby dramaturgically echoing Craig Calhoun's call for an ethics of globalisation. Echoing Jeffers' thoughts about the ethical measures between refugees, national space and hospitality or hostility, Calhoun argues for a kind of ethics that can envision being bound to others who are not immediately present to us (e.g. through systems of state, diplomacy and trade) (2009, 212). Imagining this addressee as a Danish person whose life has been supported by the systems that unhome Rohan, the monologue underscores the relational ethics at work in these intimate relations with global, statutory ramifications. Rohan notices the support a Danish person might be given in developing identity and self: 'the whole world helped you and supported you until you became who you are'. But, durational again, 'meanwhile I was somewhere else', living where systems support their own interests, and where people like Rohan have to 'fight to stay a good person'. Laying the foundation for dramaturgical ethics, Rohan writes that when they communicated their experiences to the imaginary Danish addressee, 'you turned away, telling me this is not your fault. Not your responsibility'.

Following Levinasian ethics, where it is 'the Other' who 'call[s] me to responsibility' (2013, 213), O'Toole and Kristić understand the practices of dramaturgy as 'intrinsically ethical' (2017, 1) because dramaturgy is able to 'understand, interpret [and] place the experiences of the Other within our own lived parameters, and be inspired by difference' (1). In *Dramaturgy and Migration*, Yana Meerzon and Katharina Pewny draw the question of ethics into the process exactly of relating between self and other. They argue that 'theatre makers, authors, and performers [...] offer their creative search for a collective better understanding [of] our relations to the stranger, the Other' (2020, 2), which also brings forward new 'dramaturgies of self' (2). Pewny and Meerzon centre the need for nuanced artistic expressions of migration, but also that in the wake of a so-called crisis, the dramaturgies of self and others might apply equally to responding to global crisis and positions taken in relational moments and the intimacies of people experiencing systems in different ways.

In the arenas of politics and media, refugee stories frequently operate a 'victimhood-hope dialectic' (Cox 2012, 128), imagistically and linguistically portrayed through precarious crossings over land and seas, and in representations of trauma or heroic overcoming, welcome or hostility that 'potentially renders the migrant journey, the perilous crossing a game for our imaginaries' (Cox and Zaroulia 2016, 148). Silvija Jestrovic identifies a 'hyper-authenticity' (2008, 160) across bureaucratic and performative spaces, where the 'exile is required to select, condense, and pitch his/her experience so it comes across convincing and valid' (160). This means that it is not only a question 'of being an asylum seeker, a refugee or an immigrant, but also of performing accordingly' (160 all emphasis in original). As such, the refugee and asylum seeker are asked to 'perform themselves' (160), revealing 'the very paradoxes of authenticity' (160), as the semiotics and performances have 'real material consequences, often becoming the deciding factor between permission to remain and deportation' (160). People's lives depend on these claims of truth, but conversely, as front person of Refugees Welcome, Michala Bendixen writes, '[h]indrances and

risks on the path to applying for asylum make it almost impossible for applicants to stick to the truth throughout their perilous journeys' (2020, 26).

Where Jestrovic formulates the stakes of performing autobiography in refugee contexts above, Thompson emphasises the pitfalls of the 'imperative to tell' (2009, 56), relying on participants' ability to give a coherent narrative account of a difficult experience is associated with trauma-relieving effects. While, as Thompson also notes, this might indeed occur, there is also a danger that such an approach becomes more about 'the discipline of trauma studies' (57) than a 'culturally sensitive appreciation' (57) for the participants, their needs and the highly individual, collective and cultural ways people respond to trauma. The workshop activities, therefore, sought to remain open enough for people to share their stories if they wish to, without demanding that people exposed themselves in ways they did not want to be exposed. That said, the group in Sjælsmark explicitly wished to work with their experiences of seeking asylum and navigating the bureaucratic systems and the political climate in Denmark and were less interested in creating any other symbolic or fictional material than the story of the politicians. While this might not meet Payman's call for politics and law, Abbas argued that:

People here [in Sjælsmark] they need to have someone from outside the circle to listen to them. Where do they came from, what is their problem and what is the things they are facing here and in their minds and from their past, and they just want people from outside to listen and to know what is happening here. (Interview, 17th December 2018)

The last section of this article delves further into Jestrovic's notion of hyper-authenticity by portraying how the participants worked with the demand to undertake the 'bureaucratic performance[s]' (Jeffers 2012, 13) of asylum seekers across multiple spaces in their play. *This Is Us* engaged with these themes through agentive and aesthetic performance strategies, which sought to strive exactly against the formulaic tellings of refugee stories, pivoting between the victimhood-hope dialectic, while preserving the wish to address their situations.

A case for dramaturgical ethics – on fireworks and bombs

During the first session described above, Payman continued his line of questioning by stating: 'so, basically, we are just helping you with your research'. Even though I explained that my investment in their situations extends beyond the workshops (combining, as stated, my time in Sjælsmark with an internship at Trampoline House, helping on their in-house and outreach initiatives), the question remains. Were they just helping with my research, and, in that case who is the work benefitting?

There has been an increased focus on the explicit recognition of the systems of power one operates within when carrying out both artistic practice and research with refugees and asylum seekers. For example, RISE offers a list of ten bullet points for artists seeking to work with them. Echoing Payman's call for 'not just theatre', RISE operate under the banner of 'nothing about us without us' (RISE 2015), thereby compelling the practitioners to remain in conversation with their privileges and motivations:

We are not a resource to feed into your next artistic project. You may be talented at your particular craft but do not assume that this automatically translates to an ethical, responsible and

self-determining process. Understand community cultural development methodology but also understand that it is not a full-proof methodology. Who and what institutions are benefiting from the exchange? (RISE 2015)

That reflective craft does not automatically translate to an ethical and responsible process echoes the concerns of the group in Sjølsmark. Creating theatre and research that seeks to address structural imbalances done from the perspective of someone who benefits from those same structures (in my case, citizenship, academic and artistic affiliations, whiteness) is and should be complicated, as 'artistic practice cannot be neutral' (RISE 2015). In a recent issue of *Research in Drama Education*, Taiwo Afolabi puts forward the practice of 'ethical questioning', intended exactly for socially engaged artistic practices and critical examination of projects from format to execution (2021). Similar to RISE's line of inquiry, these questions are aimed at power and privilege ('Who holds absolute power in the project?'), the socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of the people involved, and the process of knowledge production ('Who makes decisions about how the knowledge is being produced?'). Afolabi positions this practice of ethical questioning as 'central to the practice of a reflective practitioner' (2021) in a similar way that RISE stipulate commitments of ethics and commitment to understand the community they wish to work with.

While I was in conversation with these questions before entering the fieldwork, Payman's comments prompted deeper reflection and relational engagement with this. I leave these questions and reflections in this text with the productive tensions they are meant to hold and to envision where dramaturgical ethics might do its work. The difficulty and degree to which the hostility of political systems and media played out in the groups' lives raised exactly the question of theatre making not only as a priority but also as a viable model for social change. For example, while Payman asked for politics and law, Thompson prompts practitioners to be critical of the thought that projects dealing with politics through subject matter or people involved is 'by some default process [...] one that can claim an automatic contribution to social change' (2009, 5). Contemplating the tendency to overestimate theatre's potential to transform the lives of those involved, stipulate fundamental limitations and necessary ethical reflections of undertaking such projects as someone who 'enjoys the privileges of the West' (Jeffers 2012, 1). And yet, what for Payman was a question of politics, access and change was a future dream and a nice way to spend some time for other members of the group. On that day, we settle the conversation in the only place it can: uncertainty and unresolvedness; me, unable to change the immediate political circumstances of their lives, them, needing, urgently, for the political circumstances of their lives to be changed. These refractions and direct line of questioning highlighted not only the need for a process that was ethical, engaged and able to extend beyond the moment of making theatre together. It also underscored the need for a kind of dramaturgy that could go beyond the theatrical frame in order to address fundamental differences in privileges necessarily and rightfully infringing on moments of making theatre and of being in community.

Calling, then, for a different methodological approach, dramaturgical ethics emerged as a way to structurally and theatrically address the differences in privilege, national and legal situations, while being ethnographically present to each other's legal, political and lived experiences. From a playwright's perspective, whose aim is dramaturgical

presence in both text and performance, I suggest while 'dramaturging' might be concerned with 'the work's composition' (Turner and Behrndt 2016, 4), dramaturgical ethics applies as much to the composition of the work as the composition of the world, and understanding how people are placed in it. Thinking dramaturgy together with ethics suggests understanding that the ethical components of dramaturgy are already at work both within and beyond performance. This includes also the dramaturgies and design of scholarship, positionality, and cultural capital as well as the socio-political frameworks that keep these systems in place, and have an effect on moments of making performance in settings where people occupy different legal status.

I have remarked on the process of dramaturgy and ethics in several parts of this article: in designing a process from the participant's situations rather than artistic intent; in practicing solidarity beyond moments of making; in leaving the aesthetic choices of representation and self-representation up to the people whose stories and lives one is engaging with; in subjecting one's own artistic and scholarly practice to the lines of questions put forward by RISE and Afolabi; and in acknowledging the positions and inscriptions into globalised and judicial systems of citizenship and legal status. Exploring, then, how dramaturgical ethics might apply to these moments beyond making theatre together, I provide two examples. Firstly, in a workshop setting, Rohan jokingly doubted that I was Danish due to the darker colour of my eyes and hair. I pointed the Danish letter in my last name out to him, and that settled the matter of my nationality. Overhearing the conversation, Rohan said: 'you are lucky, you only have to say you have a Danish letter to gain citizenship. We have to do a lot more'. Prior to this, Rohan said 'Here [in Sjælsmark] you have to learn a lot of different things. We all have to become a lawyer to know about your case'. In other workshop sessions, the group had remarked on how they had to do more work, every day, to pass, to be accepted and to be seen as human. Catrin Evans calls this 'invisible labour' (2020, 250) which describes the 'unspoken debt that those within the asylum system endure and pay off in order to access the most basic and minimal levels of dignified living' (250). Sara Ahmed similarly argues that these implicit debts '*makes that figure [the asylum seeker] do more work*' (Ahmed 2004, 122). These smaller moments that concretely addressed the ways in which systems played out differently in our lives, shows exactly the invisible work required of Rohan, but not of me. The imaginative moment, where I did not hold a citizenship and that it was then the letter in my name that gave it back to me, was creative in showing the arbitrariness with which these things are often given, taken and received. Rohan's monologue above presented a way of working through these dynamics, positioning Rohan as the one to call the audiences, the government the politicians to responsibility, to ethics.

The other situation took place after DPP had spoken in the media about their plans for Lindholm Ø. As a reaction, there were demonstrations happening all over Denmark, celebrating the 70th birthday of the Human Rights Convention. Many of the people I had gotten to know through the fieldwork were either speaking at the demonstration or supporting it. I translated the Danish speeches to people from Sjælsmark. Mid-sentence, Ghafour asks me where the fireworks are. He says that in France, demonstrations would have fireworks, but in Syria they would have bombs. Although there is nothing funny about what he said, the moment was constructed as a joke, and the humour was what showed the inherent differences of our experiences of protesting and

encounters with political systems. Asserting my belief in human rights looked like taking to the street and standing beside those whose struggles I will never fully understand. For him, fighting for human rights is a thing with fireworks, bombs, wars and journeys. Perhaps it was only the conditions of conversation and comprehension of the world that were at stake. I argue, nonetheless, that these micro-moments are places in which to meet and be called to ethics; of trying to understand, through humour or dramaturgy, the moment inhabited together, the way to proceed.

Resisting the refugee narrative: *This Is Us* through the lens of dramaturgical ethics

There is a lot of stories out there. A lot of stories that talk about who I am: according to them, according to you, according to the things you fear to see or the things you want to see.

A lot of stories that talk about experiences that I've had as if they were phenomenon, as if they were graphs, as if they were yours to tell.

And then there are the things that frame me: The camp, the media, the wars, the conflicts, the seas, the journeys, the borders, the worn shoes, the ones who look at me with kindness, the ones who look at me with despise.

A lot of it tells you more about yourself than it does of me. It places you in the center of all the stories. The one who hates or loves the other. Me being the other, you being the one. The main character, the one who gives or withdraws, opens or closes. The one who controls the story by pulling the strings, the one who says who I am by saying who I am to you.

None of it speaks of what I was or what I could be.

None of it means that I speak first. But in this play, I want to speak first.

(Excerpt from Prologue, by Abbas, Rohan, Ghafour, Hasan, Ahmad Kaya, Van Damme and Helene, Sjøelsmark 2018)

The workshops in Sjøelsmark coupled creative writing exercises, teaching on how to write plays and conversations from why and whether stories mattered to the dynamics of life in Sjøelsmark and Denmark's political climate. Alternating between these elements opened up a reflective space for all involved – me, as a playwright and researcher learning about their situations, ways of telling stories and creative skills, and them, learning about the building-blocks of drama in terms of action, character, dramatic structure, conflict and staging. This approach further reflected the aims of dramaturgical ethics: the process did not seek to prescribe certain stories, but rather to develop a practical and reflective skillset developed together, so the group could make their own decisions on what kind of play they wanted to write.

Two sessions in particular laid the foundations for the plot and structure of *This Is Us*: in the first one, mentioned in several parts of this article, we gathered around a sheet of paper, and the group wrote all the themes they would wish to tackle in a play and the details they wished to share about their life in Sjøelsmark. This was prompted by Payman and Hasan's reflections about theatre, politics and law, but also settled that they did not want to write fiction. The group's choice to address their situations directly in the hope that people would listen guided their reflections and thematic choices. The sheet looked as follows, and the transcribed headlines were (Figure 1):

- Dignity: being treated like an animal, not having control over your situation.
- Stereotypes: being treated like a stranger and an outsider, being generalised and judged.
- Double-edged systems: a feeling of being inside a system that creates the monsters it expects to see in refugees
- Lack of control: not being able to vote to change these systems
- Time: losing years of life living in camps
- Person = country: the experience of being judged by where they are from and not who they are. The feeling that some countries, like Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, are scary words, and that people think themselves 'better' because they are from European countries as well as reflections that people do not choose where they are born.

These reflections became a cornerstone both in conversations about their situation as well as foundations for the themes they chose to explore in the play. For example, it was from this sheet they wrote their letters to a Danish person, which became the basis of Rohan and Abbas' monologues above.

Secondly, I conducted a workshop combining Christopher Booker's (2004) idea of the seven basic plots within (dramatic, and, importantly, Western) storytelling with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's thoughts on the danger of 'the single story'. Adichie elaborates on how stories that are told from a western centric perspective can continue systems of power. For Adichie, storied power is the 'ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person' (Adichie 2009). This led to a session where the group shared different ways of telling stories from their countries and childhoods, like flowers on a Kurdish mountain or teenage-nights watching the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Consolidating the narrative arches of the stories most often told with the critical awareness around who does the telling led to two notable decisions

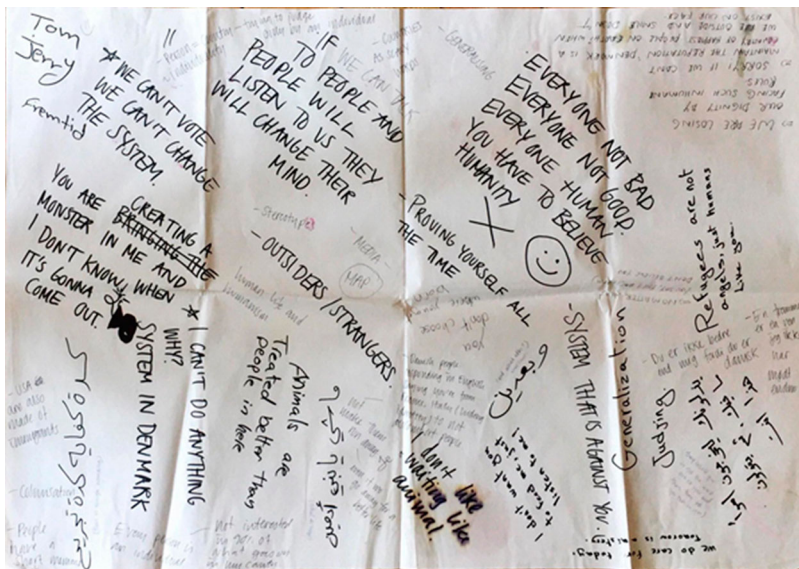


Figure 1. Worksheet, the map of non-belonging.

being made about the play: firstly, they wanted to write a character (the politician) who did not approve of refugees in order to understand why a person could have that view. Secondly, they did not want to tell stories that encouraged the audience only to pity them. The telling of such stories, they said, did not account for everything they were before and beyond being asylum seekers. Ghafour, for one, insisted on the need to include humour and black comedy because this would destabilise the audience's perception of the refugee and the sadness and trauma that so often surrounds them. Cox has remarked how Shahin Shafaei's *Refugitive* used similar strategies. Comedy can serve affective purposes of engagement, insist on the humanity of the performer and avoid 'a preoccupation with trauma [...] that risks fixing refugee identity along the narrow lines of victimhood and suffering' (Cox 2009, 465). Thereby, humour becomes a strategy for resisting the imperative to tell, the dominating narratives around victimhood and trauma as well as the hyper-authenticity expected in a range of refugee performances. Hasan's monologue underscores this. He writes about life in Sjælsmark, but rather than describing it as a prison, we meet a tour-guide character who shows Sjælsmark as a rehab or retreat centre:

I've been on quite an adventure since I left Pakistan, I've been through Dublin, Geneva and Palermo and that's just the conventions! Finally though, you'll be pleased to hear, I'm safe and sound here in Denmark and am living it up in a place called Sjælsmark. Haven't heard of it? Well, please let me explain ...
[...]

3 metre high fences. Two brand new gates. Even private guards. I can never remember which security firm they're from, it says 'KriminalForsøgen' or something on their uniforms. They've got the army to protect us too, we can hear them practicing. It's reassuring that constant sound of gunfire and those tanks, it lulls me to sleep at night. They have a great integration program to teach us the secret to the Danes' happiness. Society is so materialistic these days so at Sjælsmark we have the opportunity to live simply and escape modern technology. No fridges, no TVs and just 120kr every 15 days. It's the perfect program for smokers, alcoholics, anyone looking to break a bad habit or get back to nature. There's plenty to do here too, walk in the woods, walk in the fields, walk beside the lakes, around the fence, anywhere really.
[...]

So if you'd like to relax in the Danish countryside for a few months or possibly a few years (no one really knows how long they're staying), Sjælsmark is your dream destination. I'd be happy to show you around!
(Excerpt from scene 9, by Hasan, Sjælsmark 2018)

The difficulty of living a life of dignity and humanity in Sjælsmark becomes apparent exactly because the tone strives against the topic. It is humour that carves out the space for the gravity of the situation to unfold,² shaping the monologue around the ethical question of how it is possible to allow a human being to live under such conditions. This enforces Nicholson's (2005, 67) view that in applied theatre practice 'fiction and reality, self and otherness, are not in opposition or isolated from each other but [...] interrelated and mutually embedded'. Hasan's words display how the group were often simultaneously invested in the concrete and precarious terms of their lives, but also the ways in which they might subvert and reimagine this situation.

The opening monologue reflects the process of coming at playwriting from resisting dramaturgies of victimhood and suffering, while foregrounding the structure of a play where macro-levels of politics, media and institutions have micro-level consequences. In its address to a Western audience, this monologue reflects the aims of dramaturgical ethics in shifting the hierarchies of telling and resisting the formulaic telling of refugee narratives, which often reduce unique experiences and lived realities to graphs, phenomenon and 'yours to tell'. Drawing on the session where we worked with the way politics and media constructs identities around people, the prologue begins not a story, but rather a dismantling of a story: 'there are the things that frame me: the camp, the media, the wars, the conflicts, the seas, the journeys ...'

Echoing the notion that 'crisis' reflects more on European countries than refugees, and the issues of story and power raised by Adichie and RISE, the monologue critiques the nexus of politics, storytelling and the ethical demands of who tells: '[i]t places you in the center of all the stories. The one who fears or loves the other. Me being the other, you being the one ... the one who says who I am by saying who I am to you'. The group begin the play by centring their own experiences ('in this play, I want to speak first'), and drawing out the conflicts and complexities in doing so, namely that much telling in refugee situations happens in a 'culture of institutional disbelief' (Dennis 2013, 287).

After writing the play, the group decided they would like to also perform it. In order to get from the page to the stage, I asked two actors, Andrew Whalley and Claudia Domenici from Copenhagen Theatre Circle,³ to come to Sjølsmark and work with us on staging and rehearsing. The play was performed to a full Trampoline House at the Christmas Party on 7 December 2018, and while the participants had chosen to write the play in English, they also made scripts to the play available in both Arabic and Farsi.⁴ Prior to this, the group had decided that they wanted to make a slideshow with photos and drawings of them doing other things than being refugees as a backdrop for the play. Abbas made illustrations and the rest of the group showed pictures of them as friends, tourists, actors, beach-goers, boat-rowers, cooks, horse-riders, family-members and artists. Jeffers remarks on similar interventions in *A Letter Home*, where audiences are also confronted with a backdrop of interventions into the narrative, which challenged 'the image of the asylum seeker as a victim' (2012, 143), and encourages a more complex reading of the political context in question. This process highlights the dramaturgical ethics at play in the creative output: by making agentive creative choices that resists the demand for hyper-authenticity and the currency of refugee narratives, the group insisted on an aesthetic that could hold the complexity and tensions of their situations. The different registers of fictional, character-based scenes alongside quasi-autobiographical monologues highlighted the ethics between the structures making decisions and the people living them. These dramaturgical choices expressed at once the precarities of living in contact with systems that are reductive and often unable to hold in view the complexities of lived experiences, as well as an aesthetic seeking to resist the typical reactions and tellings of refugee narratives.

Welcome to Hogwarts

After the play was performed, I went to Sjølsmark for a final session to interview the group about the process and to round up. We debriefed quickly and had time on our

hands. Prior to this, some of them had received donations of instruments to start a band with. We decided to get the instruments and have a music session, not for anything but the sake of it. Armed with guitars, amps, a bass and other miscellaneous sound-makers, we walked down the main 'street' of Sjølsmark playing chords and singing. At one point Ghafour said: 'welcome to Hogwarts', while gesturing to the grey sky, old, dilapidated buildings and iron fences transforming them into a school for witchcraft and wizardry. The irony was obvious. Sjølsmark is not a place for magic or music. Though not a moment of research, it was in times like these, in demonstrations, sharing meals or being taught about Kurdish dancing or Lebanese pop music, where the wider work rooted and grew. While that is perhaps too porous to construct robust research arguments around, the poetic subtleties of being in a position of learning and standing beside people 'while they are responding to what life does to them' (Goffman 1989, 125), led to the understanding of dramaturgical ethics as a framework to address responsibility, positionality and practices of solidarity within moments of making and beyond. The solidarity produced by making theatre and by caring beyond the theatrical frame, as Thompson and Fishers also note, can re-orientate our work (Stuart Fishers and Thompson 2020) within the field, on stage and on the academic page.

While the group wished to perform the play again to a wider audience, the political realities of their situations played out. A month after the performance, almost all were facing deportation, and handled this in the unpredictable and risky ways available in such situations: going underground, staying put or appealing their case. Currently, I could not gather that same group in a room, let alone on a stage. I intend to leave the reader with a lack of conclusion in favour of open questions, because this, I believe, is also where we do the work of performance and drama. Holding space for complex and precarious lives that resist straightforward telling or dramaturgical process shows the call to ethics and responsibility. Stories that unfold in relational moments of care, can then re-orient scholarship, dramaturgy and artistic practice, and, most importantly, the way in which we enter into the world together.

And so, in an effort at a non-concluding conclusion, I end on walking through Sjølsmark, not a place for magic or music, in a moment that is neither research nor revolution, yet, is perhaps both poetry and theatre, strumming the chords of Bob Marley's *Redemption Song* with people who wrote and acted. Whose lives are filled with the precarities, structural imbalances and limbos of citizenship, legal status, belonging; whose proximity of life to mine affected the aesthetics and dramaturgy of the play and the ethics beyond.

Notes

1. I acknowledge the problems of theorising displacement mostly through authors of the Global North, and strongly believe in doing the work of citational ethics like Alison Phipps does in *Decolonising Multilingualism: Struggles to Decreate* (2019). I use this scholarship in this article particularly to reflect the setting I was in and the West's response to refugees.
2. For more on humour and dramaturgy within this play, see also Grøn (2019).
3. Copenhagen Theatre Circle is a Copenhagen-based theatre company producing English-speaking plays.
4. Trampoline House place language translation as a practice of democratic participation. At all events at the house, they make translation available to the languages present; Arabic and

Farsi are spoken most widely by users of the House, and the participants wanted to give the audience the possibility to read the play even if they did not understand the performance.

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