NATION OVERBOARD

by LINDA JAIVIN

A response to:

Boy Overboard

by Patricia Cornelius

Currency Press

Currency Press

THE PERFORMING ARTS PUBLISHER

&

COPYRIGHTAGENCY CULTURAL FUND

NATION OVERBOARD

by LINDA JAIVIN

A response to:

Boy Overboard

by Patricia Cornelius

Copyright Details

First published in 2015
by Currency Press Pty Ltd,
PO Box 2287, Strawberry Hills, NSW, 2012, Australia
enquiries@currency.com.au
www.currency.com.au

ePub ISBN: 9781925210798
mobi ISBN: 9781925210804

Series Editor: Toby Leon
Cover design: Miranda Costa

Publication of this title was assisted by the Copyright Agency Limited’s Cultural Fund.

Author's Biography

Photo by Jade Muratore

LINDA JAIVIN is a writer, translator and cultural commentator. She is the author of ten books, including the the recent Quarterly Essay 'Found in Translation: In Praise of a Plural World'. Her first novel was the comic-erotic international best-seller *Eat Me*. Her other fiction includes *Rock n Roll Babes from Outer Space; Miles Walker, You're Dead; Dead Sexy; The Infernal Optimist, A Most Immoral Woman* and her seventh and most recent novel, *The Empress Lover*.

The Infernal Optimist, a dark comedy set in Villawood Immigration Detention Centre, was short-listed for the 2007 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. She wrote it after regularly visiting asylum seekers at Villawood between 2001 and 2005, where she helped some to draft appeals on their cases to the minister for immigration. In addition to *The Infernal Optimist* and her play *Halal el Mashakel*, which features in *Staging Asylum*, she has written short stories and essays and another full-length play, *Seeking Djira* as well as the libretto to an (unproduced) opera *A Better Life*, on the subject of refugees, seeking asylum and detention.

She is a frequent contributor to publications including *The Monthly*. Her non-fiction includes *Confessions of an S&M Virgin* and the China memoir *The Monkey and the Dragon* as well as *Beijing* (2014), which will be published as part of Reaktion Press's Cityscopes series. She is also literary translator from Chinese, with a specialty in film subtitles, and an editorial consultant to the ANU's Australian Centre on China in the World.

NATION OVERBOARD

'Our history is a tragedy – a difficult lesson to teach.' - Fatima in *Boy Overboard*

I once met an old woman from Damascus. A year or two into the Syrian conflict, someone told me that a missile destroyed her daughter's home, so her daughter's family moved in with her. Then another missile sheared off the top floor of her home. Last I heard, a male relative was trying to get the women and children out through Turkey to safety. They may by now be among the fifty-one million people wandering the globe seeking refuge from war, persecution and starvation.

The world has not seen so many refugees, including 'internally displaced' people, since World War II.[1] Living in Australia, a vast country with a total population of less than twenty-four million, the mind boggles at such numbers. What's more, as citizens of a relatively peaceful and democratic society, we may find it hard to imagine being trapped in the middle of a war or being imprisoned, tortured or threatened because of your political or religious beliefs, tribal identity or even sexual orientation.

Yet in multicultural Australia, where nearly one in three people were born overseas, we all know someone (or the sons and daughters of someone) who came here seeking asylum: from Hitler, Mao, Stalin, Marcos, Pinochet, Saddam; from right-wing dictators, left-wing dictators, wars, civil wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions, juntas and coups. In other words, the asylum-seeking characters who populate the stage in Patricia Cornelius's play *Boy Overboard*, who are in their case fleeing the Taliban, could easily be living next door. That the play's protagonists are a couple of spirited, soccer-mad kids with a schoolteacher mother and taxi-driving father should make them even more familiar: they are not so unlike the rest of us, after all.

No one gets to choose where he or she is born. Australians are not better than anyone else for the simple fact of having been born in Australia, or

having immigrated here through 'normal' channels, just lucky. When previously asked to share that luck with those less fortunate – refugees from World War II, Vietnamese boat people – we have not always been gracious about it. But, as a nation, we have never before been as we are today: arms crossed, eyes averted, happier to say 'Fuck off, we're full' (and buy the t-shirt) than to consider how a few more might fit in. To understand how we got here, and how *Boy Overboard* came about, we need to travel back to the start of the twenty-first century – and, indeed, a few years before that.

In 1992, Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating introduced mandatory detention (limited, however, to 273 days) for all 'unlawful immigrants', including asylum seekers (people who claim to be refugees but have not yet had their cases assessed). Immigrant hostels gave way to immigration detention centres. There followed protests by detainees, including in the hastily built desert detention centre in Woomera in 2000. But it was only in the second half of 2001 that Australia's increasingly punitive policies towards asylum seekers sparked a high-temperature, high-stakes political argument that split the country and soon spilled onto the nation's stages.

The 'inciting incident' in the political drama took place in August 2001, when the Norwegian freighter MV *Tampa* rescued 438 asylum seekers from a sinking boat headed to Australia. Most were members of the persecuted Hazara ethnic minority of Afghanistan. Many were ill and dehydrated. All were traumatised by the events that had caused them to flee their homes and the harrowing boat journey itself. Among them were four pregnant women. Prime Minister John Howard refused to allow the *Tampa* to enter Australian waters.

The captain of the Tampa, Arne Rinnan has described what happened next: 'When we asked for food and medicine for the refugees, the Australians sent commando troops...' The Howard government had turned a humanitarian crisis into a military issue of 'border control'. In the end, Howard ordered the Australian Navy to dump the asylum seekers on the tiny, aid-dependent island nation of Nauru. He rushed retroactive legislation through Parliament that, among other things,

denied those on board the *Tampa* the right to seek asylum in Australia. The legislation violated Australia's humanitarian obligations under the UN Convention on the Refugee (to which Australia is a signatory and even helped to draft). The Howard government did not care: the point was to deter other asylum seekers from arriving by boat.

In Norway, the government awarded its highest civic honour for humanitarianism to Captain Rinnan.

Act Two saw the action shift to the US, where, on 11 September, Al Qaeda operatives turned passenger planes into bombs, taking down the Twin Towers in New York and smashing into the Pentagon. Howard happened to be in Washington; the events there shook him profoundly. Although Osama Bin Ladin claimed a victory for Islam, many Muslims around the world were horrified and angered to see terrorists hijack their religion. But the resulting wave of anti-Islamic sentiment served the government's agenda, for many (though not all) asylum seekers in that period were themselves Muslim, fleeing tyrannies in Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. Howard's defence minister Peter Reith and his parliamentary secretary Peter Slipper were among those who explicitly linked the nation's security from terrorism to the issue of asylum seekers.

ASIO would later deny that there was any factual basis for such a claim (which has been repeated, despite its spuriousness, more recently by members of the Abbott government).[2] But the damage was done. And so even refugees who were fleeing the same brand of Sunni extremism that had claimed 9/11 for a victory suddenly found themselves branded potential terrorists. *Boy Overboard* highlights this irony. The reason the (not untypical) family must flee is that the parents are defying the Taliban ban on the education of women, helping to run a secret school for girls. Their feisty little daughter, Bibi, likes to play soccer with her brother Jamal and his friends, who, nervous about the consequences for both her and them if she is discovered by the Taliban, order her to 'Cover up' and 'Go indoors'. Bibi is clearly a ticking time bomb – even before she accidentally steps on a landmine and the others have to work out how to rescue her without triggering an explosion.

The third act in the real life political drama occurred in October 2001, when the navy intercepted a 'Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel' (SIEV) – a rickety fishing boat packed with 223 asylum seekers. Philip Ruddock, then minister for immigration, claimed on the basis of initial, mistaken reports that the asylum seekers had blackmailed the navy into helping them by threatening to throw their children into the sea. The following day, the government announced a federal election for 10 November. It made 'border protection' a major theme of the election, and Howard and Reith repeated the 'children overboard' story even though by now the government knew it was untrue. (A later Senate investigation would find that the government had misled the public and cynically exploited fears around being swamped by boat people by 'demonising' asylum seekers.)

On 19 October, another SIEV, dubbed SIEV X, sank in international waters but within an Australian 'border protection surveillance area' off Christmas Island. The tragedy claimed the lives of 146 children, 142 women and 65 men. The government – criminally, according to some – refused to take any responsibility.[3]

Tampa, the 'children overboard' affair and the sinking of the SIEV X put the subject of refugees at the centre of national politics. It provoked cruelty and indifference in some, and sparked compassion in others. People involved in theatre tend to have a strong sense of empathy for the simple reason that the act of creating a character relies on the ability to imagine oneself in the shoes of others. The issue galvanised the country's artists, writers and theatre-makers.

For me it was personal: my grandfathers were Jewish refugees from Russia; I imagined them locked up in Nauru and Woomera, treated as less than human. I began visiting asylum seekers in Sydney's Villawood Detention Centre in late 2001 and eventually wrote two plays, a novel and a number of short stories and essays on the subject.

For the children's author and father Morris Gleitzman, it was personal too. He said he 'began to notice there were plenty of children on these boats and like any other parent, I wondered what it must be like to

take your family on this sort of journey.' He said he was 'shocked and appalled' to realise that the government's policies effectively denied 'that these were actually people – human beings'.[4] He realised that he had the ability to tell a story that, like all stories, 'if they're well told, will heighten our awareness of humanity.' He wrote a children's novel: *Boy Overboard,* of which Patricia Cornelius's play is an adaptation.

If in the Children Overboard affair, the government used refugee children as political footballs, in *Boy Overboard,* Gleitzman gave them a football of their own. The title is an obvious reference to 'children overboard', but 'overboard' here also signifies wild, dangerous and bold. The journey on which the family is forced to embark once the Taliban discovers their involvement with the school for girls is certainly all that and more – and makes for edge-of-your-seat theatre.

The family gives their savings, including precious heirlooms, to a people smuggler, who gets them to Indonesia and organises passage to Australia on an overcrowded boat not unlike the real-life SIEVs. On board, the kids fantasise about playing for Australia in the World Cup. They end up locked indefinitely in detention.

Gleitzman's book came out in 2002. That year, one of the most anticipated shows of the annual Sydney Festival was *Flood Drummers*, by France's Théâtre du Soleil. The company's director, Ariane Mnouchkine was so outraged and offended by the Howard government's policies towards refugees – by now globally notorious – that she threatened to cancel the show in protest. Eventually, she relented. During the last performance, however, the company projected the words 'free the refugees' onto the set.

Supporters of the government's policies were incensed at what they saw as the inappropriate politicisation of a festival show. Festival director Brett Sheehy responded that 'it has always been a role of the arts to keep vigilant, to diagnose our social illnesses, and to sound the occasional clarion call for insomnia in the face of apathy.'[5] Mnouchkine herself felt the protest was an 'easy gesture'. She pledged to return with theatre that directly addressed the subject of asylum seekers and refugees. In 2005,

as promised, the Théâtre du Soleil returned to Australia to present *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, based partly on interviews done with refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, at the Melbourne International Arts Festival. The audience gave the show standing ovations over its entire season, which was extended by popular demand.

In his study 'Staging Hidden Stories: Australian Theatre and Asylum Seekers', Rand T Hazou, now a lecturer in theatre at Massey University in New Zealand, documents and analyses the rise of refugee-themed theatre in Australia in the three-year period bookmarked by the two Théâtre du Soleil shows. He writes:

> 'The two productions by Thêâtre du Soleil offer useful markers with which to trace a shift in the attitudes and sympathies expressed by theatre audiences and the wider Australian public towards the plight of asylum seekers. The two productions also… delineate what is arguably one of the most creative and politically engaged periods in Australian theatre history.'[6]

No less than thirty-two original plays on the subject of refugees featured on the Australian stage between 2002 and 2005. Hazou quotes the *Australian*'s Jo Litson as noting, in 2004, that 'there hasn't been such a surge of political engagement in Australian arts since the protest movements of the 1960s and '70s.'

The cultural response was not limited to theatre. Tom Keneally published *The Tyrant Novel* in 2003, Eva Sallis' *The Marsh Birds* came out in 2005 and both Alan Sunderland's *The Diary of Ali Ismail* and my detention centre novel *The Infernal Optimist* appeared in 2006, to name a few of the titles that joined *Boy Overboard* in the bookshops. There were also many non-fiction books, by lawyers, advocates, detention centre employees and investigative journalists, including David Marr and Marion Wilkinson's essential *Dark Victory*. Among other actions, the 'art gang' boat-people.org projected the words 'boat people' onto the Sydney Opera House sails over an image of the First Fleet's tall ships. Mike Parr created a performance piece in which he had the word 'alien' branded on his leg. Echoing the protests of hunger-striking

asylum seekers who had sewn shut their lips, Parr also had his lips and face pierced and sewn. Musicians responded too, among them Paul Kelly, who wrote 'I Guess I Get A Little Emotional Sometimes' in 2002 in response to the plight of asylum seekers in Woomera.

Alice Garner and Kate Atkinson formed Actors for Refugees in Melbourne in 2001. They enlisted the star power of John Doyle, Tom Long and Rachel Maza among others for such productions as *Club Refuge*, based on letters from asylum seekers in detention and staged at Fortyfivedownstairs in May 2002. There was much good will and enthusiasm for the issue in the theatrical community. When Marta Dusseldorp directed moved readings of my two refugee plays *Halal el Mashakel* and *Seeking Djira* in Sydney in 2002, she was able to enlist the likes of Joel Edgerton, Kate Beahan, Mandy McElhinney, Wadih Dona, and Hazem Shammas.

Yet when New Mercury Theatre's *Woomera* premiered at the tiny indie theatre in the basement of the Old Fitzroy Hotel in Woolloomooloo in October that year, someone threatened the life of the twenty-one-year-old scriptwriter and actor Josh Wakely. The Old Fitz nonetheless programmed the premiere of *Halal el Mashakel* along with *Refugitive*, a one-man play by the Iranian refugee actor and playwright Shahin Shafaei not long after, in early 2003. The two-play program, called *Let Loose*, drew packed houses throughout its short season – and, thankfully, no death threats.

Like Iraqi Towfiq Al-Qady's *Nothing But Nothing* (later published alongside *Halal el Mashakel* and four other short plays about refugees in Currency Press's 2014 *Staging Asylum*), Shafaei's *Refugitive* was a deeply personal, at times stream-of-consciousness monologue. Both writer-actors had spent time in detention before being recognised as genuine refugees. Their plays point an accusing finger at their audiences while pleading for – and demanding – their understanding. The emotions are raw, the tone both earnest and confrontational. Al-Qady asks his audience: 'Please, can I sleep here?' 'When will you open this gate?'

In Patricia Cornelius's *Boy Overboard*, the children also have questions: 'I want to know why Australians don't want us', Jamal asks. It is towards the end of the play, and the family is now in an offshore detention centre. Jamal is speaking to an Australian called Andrew. Andrew explains: 'The Australian government thought they'd get more votes by keeping you out. And they did.' Jamal doesn't get it. He asks his question again, and once more. The question is in fact central to the concern of nearly all of the theatre of this period.

In both Ben Eltham's *The Pacific Solution* and my play, *Seeking Djira,* the focus is on those Australians themselves. In both plays, an asylum seeker who has escaped from immigration detention invades the personal space of the Australian characters, forcing a response. In *The Pacific Solution*, that space is a sharehouse inhabited by a bong-smoking Centrelink worker, an armchair cricket commentator and a serious young law student. In *Seeking Djira*, it is a Blue Mountains retreat full of neurotically self-absorbed writers. The unexpected arrival of the asylum seeker character on the metaphorical shores of the share house and writers' centre respectively evokes responses ranging from fear, hostility, legalistic nitpicking and semi-accidental violence to compassion, protection and even, in the case of one character in *Seeking Djira*, fetishistic attraction.

Dean Bryant and Mathew Frank's *Jumpin' the Q* (2003) also used mordant humour to make a point. Satirising how Australians appeared to be more interested in reality TV than reality itself, it reimagined the Tampa affair as a kind of 'Refugee Idol', with asylum seekers competing aboard ship for the double prize of Australian citizenship and a recording contract.

Version 1.0's *A Certain Maritime Incident* (2004), a frenetic work of verbatim theatre, managed to be funny at some moments, terrifying at others and ultimately harrowing and thought-provoking. The script was a 'remix' of the Hansard's 2,200-page transcripts from the 2002 Senate Select Committee on a Certain Maritime Incident (mentioned above) that had examined the Children Overboard affair and the sinking of the SIEV X. I saw one of the first performances at Sydney's

Performance Space on Cleveland Street and recall the visceral shock of entering the space only to have to pick my way across a floor littered with prone, toe-tagged bodies. Five of the seven senators who served on the committee eventually saw the production in which they featured as characters.

In April 2004, Nigel Jamieson's *In Our Name* became the first mainstage play on the topic when it premiered as part of the upstairs subscription season at Sydney's Belvoir Theatre. Jamieson devised the play on the basis of interviews with the Al Abaddi family from Iraq. The Al Abaddis were locked up for years in detention centres including Villawood, where I had got to know them as well: conversations with one of the sons had helped inspire *Halal el Mashakel.* Some of the power of *In Our Name*, like that of *Boy Overboard*, came from the fact that it focussed on the experiences of a family, and in particular the children.

I once saw a guard refuse to allow a visitor to Villawood to take in a gift of children's clothing. 'But the children are innocent,' she pleaded. The guard, unmoved, responded: 'Then why are they here?' Yet if there is any angle in the big story of Australia's treatment of refugees that has had the power to shake and divide supporters of a hard line towards asylum seekers, it is the detention of children. In *Boy Overboard*, audiences – including, crucially, schoolchildren – are introduced to young characters with big personalities, guts, drive and intelligence. They flee to Australia, not on a whim, not for an 'easy life', but because their lives depend on it. That, to answer the Villawood guard, is why they are here. Although Cornelius uses a disarming humour in the play, its message is earnest, direct and clear.

The Howard government laid down restrictions on media reporting within the detention centres that, Hazou notes, *Media Watch* once likened to those imposed on journalists by North Korea. Although many journalists defied the bans, as a result of them, in 2003 Reporters Sans Frontières, Hazou records, 'downgraded Australia's rating on its International Press Freedom Index from the twelfth to the fiftieth most free country which reporters could work in.'[7] The Howard government

didn't care: it was essential to their policies' success that asylum seekers remained faceless, without individual stories or humanity. Only then could they be demonised and successfully turned into an amorphous threat to 'our way of life'. But, as Hazou observes, it was precisely this 'deficit of public information' that spurred theatre-makers to go to 'extraordinary lengths to visit detention centres, to meet with asylum seekers and detainees, to document and record their stories, and to disseminate their experiences and accounts in performance.'

In those years, it was not unusual to look around the Villawood visiting yard and see actors (Bojana Novakovic was a regular visitor), directors and playwrights. These included Ros Horin, whose *Through the Wire*, based on true stories of special relationships that had developed between refugees in detention and the Australians who visited them, would be a sell-out hit at the 2004 Sydney Festival and nominated for a Helpmann Award. The *Age* called it '*an extraordinary work of compassion, wit and moral urgency'*.

Following performances at the Sydney Opera House, *Through the Wire* was scheduled to tour to twenty-two regional centres over seventeen weeks. But by then, refugee theatre was blipping loudly on the radar of right-wing commentators like Andrew Bolt, ever on the offensive against government funding of cultural and academic works that he deems 'politically correct' or left-wing. For whatever reason, federal funding for the tour mysteriously dried up. The suspicion of political interference in artistic expression was considered so shocking that even the *New York Times* reported on it.[8] In the end, the NSW Ministry for the Arts stepped in to sponsor a more limited touring season.

Hazou observes that there would be only six more refugee-themed plays before the 2002-2005 movement ran its course. One was Hannie Rayson's *Two Brothers,* set in the future, in which an ambitious Minister for Home Security orders the navy not to rescue asylum seekers from a sinking boat. *Two Brothers* premiered at the Melbourne Theatre Company in April 2005. Andrew Bolt accused Rayson of smearing the Navy's reputation. His attack on Rayson used the phrase 'taxpayer-funded' no less than fourteen times; it reportedly led to members of

Howard's front bench calling for the abolition of the Australia Council itself.[9]

The play *Boy Overboard* premiered several months later, in July 2005. Théâtre du Soleil made their triumphal return with *Le Dernier Caravansérail* less than three weeks after that. Soon after, the movement fizzled out. Political theatre moved on. Nigel Jamieson returned in 2006 with what the *Sydney Morning Herald* described as the 'shatteringly good' production *Honour Bound* about David Hicks, then still incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay. Other plays explored such issues as Australia's role in the invasion of Iraq, the story of Wikileaks and Indigenous issues and stories (long a core element of Australian political theatre).

When Kevin Rudd led Labor to government in 2007, ending Howard's eleven-year reign, hopes ran high among refugee advocates that his government would dismantle or at least reform Australia's refugee policies. But by the time Julia Gillard had replaced Rudd as the leader of the party in 2010 and then Rudd replaced her again in 2013, Labor's refugee policies were nearly indistinguishable from those of the Coalition; it was Kevin Rudd who signed off on the deal to detain asylum seekers on Papua New Guinea's Manus Island.

After Tony 'Stop the Boats' Abbott became Prime Minister in September 2013, his government, with Scott Morrison as minister for immigration, introduced policies even more eye-wateringly punitive, more extreme, more shrouded in secrecy and military humbug and more contemptuous of international law and standards than any of his predecessors. Abbott's government and its boosters in the media have also sought to sideline and smear the reputations of independent observers, advocates, charities and even the president of the Australian Human Rights Commission, Professor Gillian Triggs, when they have not fallen into line on this issue. The government claims it has 'stopped the boats' and therefore its policy is a success. No more questions, please.

Meanwhile, in 2014 alone, two young asylum seekers in offshore

immigration detention died – one murdered and one dead of an avoidable medical complication. Other young refugees released into the community on Nauru complained of ongoing threats and violence, from members of the local community. By early 2015, hundreds of asylum seekers on Manus Island and elsewhere were on hunger strike, some sewing their lips, one swallowing razor blades, in a demonstration for freedom and justice. The Abbott government's new minister for immigration, Peter Dutton, refused to answer questions on the level of force used against detainees by detention centre guards during a related incident, only noting that order had been restored.

Advocates claim that a number of the asylum seekers forced back to countries including Sri Lanka and Afghanistan have been imprisoned, even tortured or killed, which would make the government guilty of refoulement (returning victims of persecution to their persecutors), which is forbidden by international law.

The Abbott government's disregard for international law and convention and lack of transparency on the issue of its treatment of asylum seekers have earned it condemnation from human rights and refugee organisations around the world. In other words, as unimaginable as it would have seemed back in the first years of the 21st century, things have only got worse. Much worse.

The Human Rights Commission report on the detention of children, released in 2015, has revealed the systemic abuse, including sexual abuse, mistreatment and neglect of children in detention under both Labour and Coalition governments. The report struck a raw nerve with the Abbott government. To borrow from the rich metaphor of the football in *Boy Overboard*, the prime minister chose to play not the ball (the report's findings) but the player (launching a vituperative attack on the head of the commission, Gillian Triggs). As a result of all these things, *Boy Overboard* is as, if not more relevant today than it ever was.

The issue seems to be returning to the cultural fore.

***

Paul Kelly, Tim Rogers, Sarah Blasko, Katie Noonan, Cat Empire and Chet Faker are among the musicians who have written or are continuing to write songs in support of justice for asylum seekers or refugees. (The Smith Street Band has perhaps been the most savage, calling their single about Tony Abbott and his refugee policies 'Wipe That Shit-Eating Grin Off Your Punchable Face'.) The plight of asylum seekers played a role in the third season of the popular and sophisticated SBS crime series *East-West 101*, and among the many other artistic responses to the plight of asylum seekers was the mural that the Chinese-Australian artist Guan Wei painted in 2013 for the entrance of the Museum of Contemporary Art, the boat people-themed *The Journey to Australia*. The Archibald-winning artist Wendy Sharpe, meanwhile, produced thirty-nine portraits of asylum seekers and refugees for an exhibition titled *Seeking Humanity*. Recent years have seen the publication of anthologies of refugee writing and writing about refugees (including *A Country Too Far* and *Alien Shores*), the memoir of a detention centre manager (*Compassionate Bastard*), the self-explanatory *Confessions of a People Smuggler* and *Walking Free*, the inspirational story of the Iraqi surgeon Munjed al Muderis, who arrived in Australia on a boat, was held for ten months in the notorious Curtin immigration detention centre, told by then immigration minister Philip Ruddock that his qualifications would never be recognised in Australia – and is today world renowned for his work on artificial limbs for amputees. There's even animation: filmmaker Lukas Schrank has used the aesthetics of graphic novels to illustrate the plight of detainees on Manus Island in *Nowhere Line* (expected release: 2015).

Refugee-themed theatre, too, is undergoing a major revival. In February 2015, Apocalypse Theatre in Sydney staged Asylum, three programs of short plays, produced as moved readings, and written by a variety of playwrights from emerging to established (Hilary Bell, Noëlle Janaczewska) and also including asylum seekers and refugees themselves.

The night I went, there was a play by a young Afghani playwright, Amir Mohammadi – he would have been only slightly older than

Bibi and her brother when Gleitzman wrote *Boy Overboard* and, by coincidence, had had to flee because of his own involvement with the education of women in Afghanistan. The play he presented was one he had written there and that had been performed secretly: for the program Asylum, it was translated into English. The artistic director of Apocalypse, Dino Dimitriadis, told me that around the country, refugee-themed productions are in progress – all manner of productions, all sorts of stages, and including commissions.

It's exciting news. But will it make a difference?

As Emma Cox, the editor of *Staging Asylum*, noted in 2014 in *The Conversation*, over the last few years 'a good many of us involved in Australian theatre… have had to recalibrate our beliefs in the cumulative capacity of theatre about refugees to trouble consciences and topple policies. Obviously, this hasn't happened.' Punitive policies are more electorally popular than ever. Perhaps the idea that political theatre can have a broad effect on society was only ever an illusion: people unsympathetic to asylum seekers were always unlikely to take their children to see *Boy Overboard*.

This raises the question: what if we – the activists of the cultural world – were only ever talking to ourselves? The artist Deborah Kelly, an original member of boatpeople.org, told me that she used to fret about 'preaching to the converted'. When she confided this anxiety to the American political artist Martha Rosler, Rosler replied, 'who the fuck do you think you are that your own people don't need you?' She told Kelly that building the culture of politically progressive movements was 'part of your job'.[10]

Emma Cox has also written that, 'while I'm sure plays about asylum seekers' plights tend to generate discussion among those already sympathetic more often than they provoke conversions, they nevertheless push discussion forward – crucially, within the public sphere, where critics who are for or against a play's politics may enter the fray.'[11] As one of the teachers who produced and directed the 2011

Tree of Life, devised by teenaged refugees, she told the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'Australia needs to hear these stories.'

***

At the end of *Boy Overboard*, Jamal and Bibi, and their parents Fatima and Mohammed find themselves in an offshore detention centre. After Jamal asks Andrew 'Why don't Australians want us?' for the third time, Andrew drops his head and shrugs. 'I don't know', is all he can say. Jamal throws his soccer ball in the air, stops it and does some fancy footwork with the ball.

> JAMAL: The secret of soccer is to never give up, even when things are looking hopeless.
>
> BIBI *joins him.*
>
> BIBI: Don't say hopeless.
>
> JAMAL: We will reach Australia.
>
> BIBI: We will.
>
> […]
>
> JAMAL: And when we reach Australia life will be good.
>
> BIBI: It will.
>
> *Pause.*
>
> JAMAL: It will.

A review of Gleitzman's book on goodreads.com by a young student called PixelCat from early 2014 made me think that whatever the outcome for the fictional Jamal and Bibi, you could say they have already 'reached Australia':

> 'read this book in school with my grade 8 class and it changed how some of my classmates thought. there was one boy in my

> class always making racist remarks and argued that asylum seekers and taking aussie jobs and we dont have room and that they should stay in theyre own country. but once we finished this book the boy was completely different. he even did his class speech on the issue of asylum seekers and how we need to help them because they have no where else to turn. books change people.'

The play ends on a note of hope. Perhaps, against all odds, so should we.

References:

1. 'Global forced displacement tops 50 million for first time in post-World War II era', UNHCR press release, http://www.unhcr.org/53a155bc6.html

2. Gerard Henderson, 'Terrorists don't come via detention centres', the *Age,* http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/11/18/1037599359073.html

3. See Tony Kevin, 'A Certain Maritime Incident: The Sinking of SIEV X'*, Scribe*, 2004. (Winner of the ACT 2005 Book of the Year award and a winner in the 2005 NSW Premier's Literary Awards as well.)

4. Kaye Tucker, 'To Heighten Our Awareness of Humanity': Interview with Morris Gleitzman, author of 'Boy Overboard', 16 April 2003, *World Socialist Web Site*, http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2003/04/boyo-a16.html

5. Quoted in Rand T. Hazou, 'Staging Hidden Stories: Australian Theatre and Asylum Seekers', *In/Stead*, Issue Three, http://www.doubledialogues.com/in_stead/in_stead_iss03/Hazou.html

6. See Hazou.

7. See Hazou.

8. Raymond Bonner, 'From Australia's Holding Pen', 23 October 2004, *NY Times*, http://www.nytimes.com.

9. See Hazou.

10. Linda Jaivin, 'Arguments and Prayers: Deborah Kelly's Cultural Citizenship', *Sturgeon Magazine*, http://sturgeonmagazine.com.au/arguments-and-prayers-deborah-kellys-cultural-citizenship/.

11. Emma Cox, 'Refuge and refusal: why theatre about asylum seekers matters', *The Conversation*, 29 January 2014, http://theconversation.com/refuge-and-refusal-why-theatre-about-asylum-seekers-matters-21640.

Currency Press

THE PERFORMING ARTS PUBLISHER

Visit www.currencypress.com.au to:

- Download all the other titles in the series:

  www.currencypress.com.au/cuethechorus.aspx

- Browse and buy our full list of titles, from plays to screenplays, books on theatre, film and music, and more
- Choose a play for your school or amateur performance group by cast size and gender
- Obtain information about performance rights
- For students, read our study guides
- For teachers, access syllabus and other relevant information
- Sign up for our email newsletter

Currency Press

THE PERFORMING ARTS PUBLISHER

Find us on

facebook.com/CurrencyPress

twitter.com/CurrencyPress

linkedin.com/company/currency-press

Not in Print podcast

We have always believed in theatre that raises more questions than answers. So each month we're going off script—beyond the page and behind the stage—to speak with a respected Australian playwright about the depth and breadth of a single work. That's one play in thirty minutes with insights straight from the source.

Listen to Not in Print

http://www.currency.com.au/notinprint.aspx

Copyright Agency's Reading Australia website has been live since October 2013 and has already engaged thousands of teachers Australia-wide with its free resources for primary and secondary students.

'We developed the website and the resources with the specific aim of getting Australian literature back into schools', says Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund Manager, Zoë Rodriguez.

The First 200 list of works on the Reading Australia website was chosen by the Australian Society of Authors' Council after considerable debate and discussion.

'Teacher resources have so far been developed for 21 titles (10 primary, 11 secondary) in partnership with the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the English Teachers Association NSW, with another 20 secondary resources already commissioned and due on the website before the end of June.'

The teacher resources include classroom activities, assessments and links to the new Australian curriculum. In addition, the secondary resources include an introduction to the text from high profile authors and artists, such as Libby Gleeson, David Berthold, Melissa Lucashenko, Malcolm Knox and Alice Pung.

‘The extra funding, which will begin in the new financial year, will rapidly expand the free resources for teachers with 20 teaching modules related to books for primary students, 40 for secondary students and 30 for tertiary students’, Ms Rodriguez says.

‘It’s a tremendous commitment to Australian authors, publishers, teachers, students and general readers. We feel Reading Australia will put adored, but sometimes forgotten, Australian books back on people’s radars, beginning a whole new love affair with some of this country’s finest authors.’

Visit the Reading Australia website:

http://readingaustralia.com.au/

Media enquiries

Sue Nelson

t: 02 9394 7685 m: 0413 734 939

e: snelson@copyright.com.au

About Copyright Agency’s Cultural Fund

Copyright Agency’s Board is authorised by Copyright Agency’s Constitution to allocate 1.5% of its income to development projects that will support the Australian publishing and visual arts industries

About Copyright Agency | Viscopy

Copyright Agency | Viscopy connects users and creators of content, providing licences for the use of copyright material.