

## Refugee Advocacy and the Sound of Good Intentions

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Over the past few years, I have been interested in the history of public policy responses in industrialised Western countries to refugees and asylum seekers, and in how public and published opinion has reacted to and influenced that response. Over the next forty-five minutes, I'll discuss how in Australia refugee advocates have been trying to influence public opinion.

Last year, during the Melbourne International Arts Festival, Ariane Mnouchkine's Théâtre du Soleil performed *Le Dernier Caravansérail (Odyssees)*. It was a truly epic performance. The play was in two parts, each lasting three hours. Thirty-six actors played 169 characters.

In settings ranging from an Afghan village to the Sangatte refugee camp near Calais, the cast explored the varied lives and journeys of refugees and other forced migrants. *Le Dernier Caravansérail* tells a large number of interwoven stories. Some of them are mere fragments, but others are recounted, in instalments, from beginning (the circumstances that force somebody to leave their home) to end (death or the arrival in a new country or the return to the country of origins), although not always in chronological order. In *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, many voices represent different and often conflicting experiences. Together, the six hours of enacted story telling provide a nuanced and complex picture of forced migration as a global phenomenon.

Ariane Mnouchkine and her company had last been in Australia in early 2002, as guests of the Sydney International Arts Festival. Her earlier visit came less than six months after the Australian government had ordered SAS special forces to seize control of the Tampa to prevent it from disembarking 433 refugees rescued in the Indian Ocean. Like many European artists and intellectuals, Mnouchkine had been appalled by the Australian government's actions. But she decided against boycotting the festival in protest against Australia's asylum seeker policies, and instead spent some of her time in Sydney visiting the Villawood Immigration Detention Centre and speaking to refugees.

When developing the text for *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, the Théâtre du Soleil drew on stories told by refugees and collected by Mnouchkine and two other members of her ensemble at Sangatte, on Lombok, in Auckland and at Villawood. The actors were using the words with which these stories had been told (sometimes in their original languages). Originally Mnouchkine had intended to hand over the stories she had recorded to her long-standing collaborator, Hélène Cixous, whose task it would then have been to mould them into a script. Instead, over a period of several months, the ensemble workshopped scenes that drew on and indeed enacted the stories, while at the same time engaging with the act of storytelling. According to a report on the rehearsal process that appeared in *Le Monde*:

At the edge of the stage, Ariane Mnouchkine recounts the great epics, from the *Odyssey* to *One Thousand and One Nights* or *The Tempest*, while Shaghayegh Beheshti gives the whole troupe lessons in Persian.

Between Mnouchkine's appearance at the Sydney Festival and her Melbourne visit in 2005, issues related to Australia's response to refugees and asylum seekers persistently featured prominently in Australian public debate. Most of those who went to see *Le Dernier Caravansérail* at the Royal Exhibition Building last year would have been well informed about the issues canvassed in the performance. But the narratives of suffering enacted on stage, which moved many in the audience to tears, did not conform to patterns with which the audience had become familiar in the drawn-out controversy surrounding Australia's response to refugees and asylum seekers. Ever since I saw the performance last year, I have been intrigued by how little *Le Dernier Caravansérail* resembles narratives about forced migration and the refugee experience that form part of Australian public discourse.

In the public debate about Australia's response to refugees and asylum seekers, narratives designed to influence public opinion in favour or against refugees and asylum seekers are pitted against each other. Those conceived as interventions in support of a hardline response call into question the identification of asylum seekers as refugees; they often depict asylum seekers as comparatively privileged migrants who seek to bypass Australian immigration selection mechanisms and, in doing so, disadvantage 'genuine' refugees patiently waiting for their turn to be resettled by employing the services of people smugglers.

Narratives supportive of refugees are more likely also to feature aspects of the refugee experience. Refugee advocates are responsible for one set of such narratives. They are published on the opinion and letters pages of newspapers, on websites maintained by refugee advocates or advocacy groups, and in books, journals, newsletters and leaflets; they are broadcast on community radio; and they are delivered in speeches at rallies and other public events. Another, quite distinct set of narratives in support of refugees and asylum seekers is generated by journalists and published or broadcast in the mainstream media.

The Indonesian island of Lombok was one of the places visited by Mnouchkine to collect first-hand accounts from refugees. Last month, under the title 'Postcard from Lombok', a Melbourne refugee advocate published her account of a recent visit to the 55 Afghan asylum seekers stranded on Lombok on the internet. Her text is typical of many narratives that have been produced by refugee advocates in support of asylum seekers.

'Postcard from Lombok' is an extended argument for Australia to resettle the 55 marooned Afghan refugees. The advocate puts forward four reasons. First, she draws attention to the living conditions of refugees on Lombok: with a return to Afghanistan deemed too dangerous, and neither Australia nor any other resettlement country willing to accommodate them, they are stuck in Indonesia, 'going stir-crazy not having work to

do', and surviving on a 'meagre' diet. Second, she draws attention to the economic costs of not allowing the refugees to Australia:

It is simply absurd that Australia continues to pay the IOM to keep these people out of Australia and even more disgusting that they would offer money to encourage them [to] return to unsafe home countries.

Third, she implies that the Lombok refugees would easily fit in because they do not bear grudges against Australia: the Afghan women interviewed by her 'think that Australia is full of optimism, wealth and human kindness'.

Her fourth and main point is about the worthiness of the individuals concerned. Listing their professions, she concludes that '[t]hese people have skills to offer'. These skills are supposedly precisely those in demand in Australia:

Here are people wanting to enter Australia as permanent new citizens, who possess the skills Australia needs and they are denied asylum for who knows what reason. . . . In my view these people would make fantastic immigrants to Australia.

'Their work ethic is strong', she observes; therefore the refugees would presumably be more than willing to employ their skills in Australia. Most importantly, they are 'good living, non-violent people'. She illustrates their character by describing a meeting she and two other Australians had with a group of about twenty Afghan men. While they are talking, a five-year-old boy joins the group: 'little Ali was moving from man to man receiving cuddles and attention; it was not possible to work out who was his father [-] all of these men were so loving towards him.' While the men love children, the women are beautiful. They have 'very gentle and friendly faces, very beautiful female faces . . . expressive eyes'.

The advocate combines an appeal to her readers' compassion with an appeal to their self-interest. Thus her narrative is not just, or not even primarily, about the interests of the refugees on Lombok, but also, if not primarily, about Australia. It is in Australia's best interest to resettle these people, she argues, because they possess useful skills and are worthy people, and therefore would make good immigrants and good citizens. She demands to know: 'The contradiction of shortages of labour in Australia, and these people wanting to join family here and WORK, what is the problem??'

References to refugees as being worthy usually take a different form in narratives produced for the mainstream news media. In the *Age*, most articles written by journalists about the refugee experience in the past five years and not occasioned by specific events are either about the energy and optimism of refugees who have been granted a visa or resettled in Australia, or about the hardship experienced by refugees in detention.

Articles about refugees resettled in Australia tend to be edifying success stories about the benefits of starting a new life and about the assistance available to immigrants arriving as refugees. These stories often refer to the bleak past refugees left behind but do so to emphasise the adversity faced by refugees beginning a new life in Australia and the extent of the adjustments they were able to make in their new home. The articles are often as much about Australia as about refugees living in Australia, mixing self-congratulatory messages about Australians' tolerance and willingness to help and

Australia's suitability as a place where to make a fresh start, with stories of resilience, determination and ability. They are invariably illustrated by images of refugees smiling into the camera.

Articles about the experience of detention frequently include narratives of suffering, which are inevitably mediated by journalists. In recent months, the *Age* has on several occasions carried reports about Nauru. For last Saturday's edition, Michael Gordon wrote a feature article about Mohammed Sagar, the last of the approximately 1500 asylum seekers detained and processed on Nauru and in Papua New Guinea as part of the Pacific Solution, who is still detained off-shore. Gordon provides an excellent account of Sagar's predicament and uses Sagar's own words to construct a narrative of suffering. But the article makes only scant references to Sagar's life before his arrival on Nauru. The reader only learns that Sagar is a Shi'ite Muslim from Najaf who was born in 1976, was badly injured as a fifteen-year-old when an unexploded grenade detonated outside his home, fled Saddam Hussein's Iraq with his family to Iran in 1997 and left Iran four years later to try to reach Australia.

In the same edition in which Gordon's article appeared, the *Age*'s editorial was also devoted to discussing Sagar's situation and demanding that it be resolved. The editorial quotes a statement by Sagar that is also – albeit, more extensively – quoted in Gordon's feature:

'I don't want to be happy', Sagar says. 'I just want my life back.' In effect, it has been stolen from him by the Australian Government, whose unyielding immigration policy – the so-called Pacific Solution – allows for mandatory indefinite detention on a hot, desolate and near-bankrupt island, without recourse to proper legal facilities and without thought for the human condition unless that condition becomes life-threatening.

But both the editorial and Gordon's article leave it to the reader to imagine what that life stolen from him was like.

The Théâtre du Soleil enacted stories told by refugees: about their lives prior to their enforced departure from their homes, their flight, their attempts to be admitted to a country of asylum, and their lives after settling in a new country. The actors allowed the audience to recognise the play's protagonists as fellow human beings who are owed respect. The Théâtre du Soleil production appeals to the audience's compassion, without prescribing particular outcomes and without offering the audience a solution that would depend on their exercising such compassion. While the play's characters include some villains (notably, members of the Taliban), refugees are depicted as humans with fears and dreams, rather than as heroes or as intrinsically good people.

The stories told today by Australian refugee advocates and journalists sympathetic to the plight of refugees differ from those presented in *Le Dernier Caravansérail* in three important respects: they rely on a greater degree of mediation; they pay comparatively little attention to the lives of refugees before the latter reached, or tried to reach, Australia; and they depict refugees as individuals whose worthiness endows them with a value in relation to Australia's national interests.

In order to make sense of these limitations, I would like to situate the current pro-refugee discourse first in the broader, historical context of Australian responses to refugees, and, second, in the context of Australian public debate over asylum seekers in the past seven years. Given the limitations of a forty-minute paper, both contexts are necessarily sketchy.

I have recently looked at newspapers and magazines from the late 1930s. Then, the persecution Jewish refugees had suffered in Germany, their separation from family members and their material losses were barely mentioned in public. Newspapers and magazines did not publish narratives of suffering told by refugees, not even after Australia declared war on Germany. There did not seem to have been a demand for first-hand accounts by German refugees although the barbarity of the Hitler regime was often cited as one of the reasons for the prosecution of the war.

Two factors help explain why there were only few references to the trauma suffered by refugees before their arrival in Australia, and none to the sense of loss they felt even after they had found a safe haven abroad. In a nation of immigrants, new settlers were expected to arrive with their slates clean, as it were, and begin a new life unencumbered by memories of their previous existence. Furthermore, in an essentially British settler colony, the only links to the old world that were considered to be legitimate were those to the mother country. European refugees themselves were anxious to fit in, and therefore had little interest in alienating Australians by foregrounding the experiences of their previous lives.

Between 1935 and 1940, Australia reluctantly admitted about 10,000 European refugees. After 1945, the government's attitude to the immigration of refugees changed. Because of its commitment to dramatically increase the size of Australia's population and because it proved difficult for Britain to meet Australia's demand for migrants, Australia resettled about 600,000 refugees between the end of World War II and the mid-1970s. Many of them were Displaced Persons from the Baltic countries, Yugoslavia and Poland. The fact that they were classified as refugees mattered only in so far as the International Refugee Organization (IRO), and, later, the UNHCR and the Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration (ICEM) facilitated their resettlement in Australia. Until the 1980s, there were hardly any publicly available narratives about the lives of refugees prior to their arrival in Australia – it was almost as if they had no histories worth recounting.

Displaced persons whose passage to Australia was facilitated by the IRO, the UNHCR or the ICEM were classified as refugees because of the arrangements Australia had made with these international organisations regarding their transport. But until the late 1970s, refugees resettled by Australia were treated as ordinary immigrants in every other respect. They were selected according to whether or not they were suitable as immigrants and in accordance with Australia's needs rather than depending on their own need for resettlement.

Since its inception in 1945, the immigration department has been responsible for the off-shore selection of refugees. The refugee intake is deemed to be part of the country's overall migrant intake, the level of which is set every year. Refugee policy has nearly always been part of immigration policy – no matter whether Australia was dealing with European refugees applying for landing permits in 1938 and 1939, DPs resettled under the auspices of the IRO or Hungarians post-1956, whose resettlement in Australia was facilitated by the UNHCR.

There was an important exception, though: it concerned some of those who sought asylum in Australia or its territories. Thus the resettlement of West Papuan asylum seekers who had fled Indonesian-controlled West Irian (Irian Jaya) to the Australian territory of Papua and New Guinea between 1963 and 1973 was justified largely on humanitarian grounds rather than because those refugees were considered to be exemplary immigrants. Until the mid-1970s, the external affairs department, rather than the immigration department, was responsible for decisions about asylum seeker claims; external affairs officials and their ministers were not concerned about whether or not asylum seekers would be good citizens, but about whether or not their admission would harm Australia's foreign policy interests. Significantly, the West Papuans allowed to remain in Papua and New Guinea were issued with five-year renewable permissive residence visas, rather than granted permanent residence like other refugees.

Until the 1970s, Australia's response to refugees was two-fold: refugees selected for resettlement overseas were considered to be immigrants, and their suitability as settlers, rather than their suffering, determined whether or not they would be admitted. From the 1970s, they also had to meet the criteria of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Requests for asylum on the other hand were decided by Foreign Affairs officials in consultation with ASIO and the Immigration Department (or, in the case of West Papuans who had fled to Papua and New Guinea, the Department of Territories). Australia had an asylum seeker policy since 1956, but did not develop a broader refugee policy until 1977. Since then, the Department of Foreign Affairs and its minister have been most reluctant to draw on the Minister's power to grant asylum; the most recent case of an application for asylum that was actually processed by Foreign Affairs concerned the Chinese consular official Chen Yonglin, who defected in May 2005.

Since the official birth of multiculturalism in the mid-1970s, migrants' accounts of their pre-migration lives have gradually come to be valued. Ancestral links to places outside the British Isles are no longer frowned upon. But the change has been slow and gradual. In recent years, the fostering of an – often virulent – Australian nationalism has provided a strong counterweight to the influence of multiculturalism. The government's determination to test the English language skills of prospective citizens (as well as their knowledge of Australian history and values) is another indication that earlier assimilationist policies are being officially resurrected.

Notwithstanding the gradual emergence of books and films that depict the lives of immigrants and refugees before their departure for Australia, surprisingly little changed between late 1938 and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Neither the introduction

of television and the internet, nor globalisation seems to have had a decisive impact on how Australians have publicly responded to refugee movements overseas. In November 1938, Australians reading the newspaper and listening to the radio were made fully aware of the persecution of Germany's and Austria's Jews. They learned about the refugee crisis in Europe. Yet neither did the news coverage suggest, nor did many Australians come to the conclusion, that it was also Australia's responsibility to alleviate that crisis, or that the arrival of Jewish refugees in Australia needed to be seen in the light of events taking place in Germany at the time.

In 2000, Australians reading the newspaper, listening to the radio or watching television had ready access to information about the brutal rule of the Taliban and about the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein. They became aware that hundreds of thousands of Afghans and Iraqis had fled their countries, with the combined exodus from Afghanistan and Iraq dwarfing the size of European refugee movements before World War II. Yet neither did the news coverage suggest, nor did many Australians come to the conclusion, that it was also Australia's responsibility to alleviate the refugee crisis in countries such as Iran or Pakistan, or that the unauthorised arrival of Afghan and Iraqi refugees in Australia needed to be seen in the light of the disregard for human rights in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the resultant mass exodus from those countries.

The lack of interest in the lives of refugees before their arrival in Australia could be understood in the context of a long historical tradition. The decision to influence public opinion by focusing on the suffering of refugees after their attempt to reach Australia and by emphasising that asylum seekers are good people (and not just prospective citizens with skills and qualifications) needs to be seen in the light of a more recent history.

To deter boat arrivals, in 1992 the Labor government introduced the Migration Amendment Act 1992, to ensure that anybody arriving without a valid visa would be detained until a decision about their application for one had been reached; those granted a visa would then be released, others would be deported. Boat arrivals peaked in 1994, with 21 boats carrying 1071 asylum seekers arriving between 1 July 1994 and 30 June 1995, but dropped significantly over the following four years.

The Liberal-National coalition's asylum seeker policies were very similar to those of the Keating and Hawke governments. In response to the allure of Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party, however, the Liberal Party began appealing to voters concerned about non-European migration and multiculturalism in order to shore up its support. Its anti-asylum seeker rhetoric, rather than its asylum seeker policies, distinguished the Howard government from its predecessor.

In 1999, the number of asylum seekers arriving by boat once again rose sharply. The detention centres became overcrowded. It was evident that the policy of mandatory detention, which was meant to deter asylum seekers, had failed.

It was, however, successful in that it isolated asylum seekers. Being locked away in detention centres, they had to rely on people on the outside to represent their stories.

Those accommodated in the geographically remote Curtin, Port Hedland and Woomera detention centres were also removed from lawyers, the media and support groups.

When immigration detainees tried to draw attention to their situation, they had little control over how their cries for help might be interpreted. On 1 February 2000, inmates of the Curtin detention centre in Western Australia began a hunger strike. Some of the men sowed their lips together. The government did not interpret this as an act of desperation, but as blackmail. In the words of immigration minister Philip Ruddock, it was 'inappropriate behaviour', which could partly be explained as 'cultural'. For a number of reasons, the hunger strikes antagonised those making and those administering refugee policy, as well as others who were already wary of asylum seekers and their protection claims. On the other hand, the hunger strikes generated interest among those sometimes pejoratively referred to as the bleeding hearts: Australians predisposed towards the down-trodden, the marginalised, the victims of society at large.

On 13 March 2000, the ABC broadcast *A well founded fear of persecution*, a 45 minute Four Corners program about Australia's detention policy. It opened by showing photos of the naked and emaciated torsos of three men. They were Algerian asylum seekers who had arrived in Australia in October 1999 by plane, and had applied for protection visas on the grounds that they were conscientious objectors. The creators of the television program powerfully appealed to the empathy of its audience, while still trying to represent the refugee experience of persecution and flight. Their applications had failed, and two of them had eventually been deported to South Africa. The program focused on the three men as victims of Australia's detention and mandatory removal policies, and on the detention regime more generally. Courtesy of the Department of Immigration, the Four Corners team toured the Port Hedland detention centre – not knowing that for some time this would be the last opportunity for ABC journalists to film inside a detention centre.

In order to appreciate the dominant narrative strategies now employed by refugee advocates and many journalists, it is crucial to understand the dynamics of the three-sided contest taking place from about 1999. It involved asylum seekers in immigration detention who were unable to communicate directly with the Australian public and resorted to highly symbolic means of protest, which often involved self-harm; the government, which realised that political mileage could be gained from tough anti-asylum seeker policies and rhetoric, and which regarded protests by immigration detainees as hostile acts; and the 'bleeding hearts'.

On 19 July 2001, 23 asylum seekers escaped from Sydney's Villawood Detention Centre through a tunnel they had dug into the centre's drains. Another 23 escaped three days later by cutting a hole in the fence. Some of the escapees contacted journalists hoping to be able to publicise their experience as refugees and as immigration detainees. The Four Corners team decided to draw on some of their stories for a program about Villawood.

The Four Corners program *The Inside Story*, which was first broadcast on 13 August 2001, was in large part about the persecution that three men seeking asylum in Australia

had faced in Algeria, Iraq and Iran. With its focus on the Villawood escapes, it also highlighted the resourcefulness of refugees. But these are not emphases many viewers would have identified at the time. Nor are they the most widely remembered aspects of the Four Corners program. Instead the program became known for its depiction of a child. *The Inside Story* included video footage which the Iraqi detainee Aamer Sultan had taken in Villawood. It showed a six-year-old Iranian boy, Shayan Badraie, who by then had been in Villawood for 11 months and who had stopped speaking, eating and drinking.

The ABC Four Corners program on Shayan Badraie became one of the most talked about current affairs programs ever shown on Australian television. After the broadcast, the program website received over 5000 emails, more than twice the previous record. *The Inside Story* had the potential to change the dynamics of the conflict between supporters and opponents of Australia's policy of mandatory detention. This was partly because the campaign of the latter had previously been hamstrung by the invisibility of refugees in detention. 'These are voices the Australian public have not heard', the Four Corners executive producer wrote in defence of the decision to broadcast the footage provided by Aamer Sultan; '[a]sylum seekers have mostly been faceless, voiceless problems. Seeing them as human beings, perhaps for the first time, led many viewers to respond.'

More importantly, the program had such a big impact because it featured a child who could not speak for himself: an innocent victim par excellence. Commenting on the fact that the Villawood escapees had not been caught because sympathisers were harbouring them despite the sentences such assistance carried, the lawyer of the Bedraie family, Jacque Everitt, said in *The Inside Story*: 'If somebody came to me carrying an ill child – No, there would be no dilemma. I would want to do whatever I could to help them.' This was a message understood and approved of by many Australians: 'If somebody comes to me carrying an ill child, I neither ask: what is it about the place you come from that forces you to ask *me* for help?, nor do I ask: what is it that made your child ill?, but would want to do whatever I could to help them.'

For the 'bleeding hearts', the suffering of asylum seekers in Australia became the main issue. As asylum seekers conveyed their sense of suffering not through eloquent narratives but through symbolic protests, it fell to journalists and advocates to translate images of protests at Woomera and Villawood into narratives of suffering.

For the government, the screening of the Four Corners program also presented an important watershed. The Minister for Immigration and his department went to unprecedented lengths to discredit the program by casting aspersions on the character of Shayan's father, and by blaming Shayan's parents for his illness. But in the immediate aftermath of the Four Corners broadcast, the government appeared to be on the defensive.

As you will remember, events on opposite sides of the world in late August and early September 2001 changed all that. On 25 August, Australian authorities instructed the Tampa to rescue the crew and passengers of the Palapa 1 near Christmas Island. Two and a half weeks later, terrorists flew two planes into the World Trade Centre. The government was quick to associate the 'boat people' (most of whom were of Middle

Eastern origin) with terrorists – keeping asylum seekers out of Australia now became necessary because they might pose a security threat.

While there was overwhelming public support for the government's refusal to let the Tampa refugees land in Australia, and for its new asylum seeker laws, refugee advocates still had one convincing argument: it was wrong to make innocent children suffer by locking them up.

The Children Overboard affair in early October functioned as a postscript to the controversy triggered by the Four Corners program in mid-August. Although a Senate inquiry found the government's spin to have been fabricated, the insinuation repeatedly made during the affair, namely that refugees are not worthy of Australians' compassion, stuck. Refugee advocates have been on the defensive ever since, time and again assuring the Australian public that, first, refugees are essentially good people, and that, second, they would be able to make a valuable contribution to Australia.

To me, the contrast between the Théâtre du Soleil performance and narratives about the refugee experience that are circulating in the Australian public domain raises a number of interesting questions. The first asks for an explanation of that contrast. The history of the past seven years explains why refugee advocates focus on the suffering of asylum seekers in their current situation, the contribution refugees have been, or would be, able to make, and their worthiness. Long-established patterns concerning Australia's identity as a former British settler colony and the identification of refugees as immigrants help to explain why the intolerable circumstances refugees have left behind do not feature more prominently in debates about Australia's response to asylum seekers. I think it is important to reflect on these histories if only to promote narratives whose producers are more self-consciously aware of what they are doing.

Is it possible to talk about refugees other than in direct response to the government's spin? Or could one only do so if one approached the subject as an outsider, as Mnouchkine did? I was trying to describe a trend in Australian refugee advocacy; there are important exceptions to this trend. The one that comes immediately to my mind is the Material World project currently on show at Federation Square. Another is the book *From Nothing to Zero*. These examples demonstrate that, at least sometimes, advocates have choice about how to present their argument.

I also think that it is important – and that it would be possible – to reconnect to the discourse of asylum, which had some currency in the 1950s and 1960s. This may involve a critical engagement with the 1951 Convention and an attempt to historicise the criteria listed in its Article 1 – admittedly, this could be a perilous undertaking.

I was critical of today's pro-refugee discourse because I argued it is comparatively truncated. But we could also ask: how effective is it in the short and long term? And: how ethical is this discourse?

Over the past seven years, refugee advocates have tried to persuade Australians to side with asylum seekers. Advocates have been convinced that their mission would only be successful if they responded to and contradicted the government's spin about refugees and asylum seekers. The Théâtre du Soleil had only a fleeting association with Australia. Mnouchkine and her collaborators had no investment in the Australian debate over asylum seekers. They did not see the need to respond to Australian government press releases. They responded to the expectations – and perhaps: demands – of those who shared their stories with Mnouchkine. Refugees wanted their stories to be told. Or rather, they wanted *their* stories to be told. *Le Dernier Caravansérail* is framed by a letter written by Mnouchkine to one of the women she interviewed on Lombok: 'We tell your lives as promised', she reads out. Judith Miller, in her perceptive analysis of the performance, comments: 'The premise is thus, from the first, to preserve memories, to allow the exiled to tell their own stories through the conduit of the actors of the Théâtre du Soleil.'

The result is a performance that has its melodramatic moments (as much as the stories collected by Mnouchkine presumably have their melodramatic moments), but does not offer closure. In Miller's words, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* brings 'no catharsis and no clear indication of what work must be done to prevent the awfulness [it portrays],' and it builds no 'emotional arc' for the audience. And yet, judging by the Melbourne audience's response (and on the anecdotal evidence of conversations overheard in the interval between its two three-hour parts), the play had a profound impact when it was performed last year.

You may wish to argue that those attending the performance in Melbourne were particularly receptive to the play's message, because they had been sympathetic to the plight of asylum seekers to begin with. The same could of course be said of those reading texts such as 'Postcard from Lombok' or Michael Gordon's articles about Nauru. The objection that Mnouchkine was preaching to the converted assumes that the conversion of those hostile or indifferent towards refugees is all that matters. It may be at least as important for the converted to reflect self-critically on how they have been representing the voices of refugees to further their cause. 'How do we avoid replacing the word from your lips with the sound of good intentions?', Hélène Cixous asks in the program notes for *Le Dernier Caravansérail*. Straining to be compatible, too often the sound of good intentions bears uncanny resemblances to the narratives about the nation that valorise xenophobia and collective egotism.

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