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Theatre Research International / Volume 37 / Issue 02 / July 2012, pp 118 - 133

DOI: 10.1017/S030788331200003X, Published online: 03 May 2012

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S030788331200003X

How to cite this article:

EMMA COX (2012). Victimhood, Hope and the Refugee Narrative: Affective Dialectics in Magnet Theatre's *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*. *Theatre Research International*, 37, pp 118-133
doi:10.1017/S030788331200003X

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Victimhood, Hope and the Refugee Narrative: Affective Dialectics in Magnet Theatre's *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*

EMMA COX

Contemporary theatricalized refugee narratives are often understood to communicate the profound trauma associated with forced displacement, even as this trauma is made 'meaningful' or 'recognizable' to audiences by the identification, however nebulous, of hope. This article examines some of the ways in which an affective dialectic of victimhood and hope functions in Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking (2006–), a small-scale international touring work directed by Mark Fleishman and produced by Cape Town-based Magnet Theatre. Paying attention to questions of narrative and performative form, I investigate how, and for whom, victimhood and hope function in and through the work, constructing its emotional and political tensions. I trace some of the conditions of its circulation, with particular emphasis on its transnational work with respect to a metropolitan audience at London's Oval House Theatre in 2010. In this, my purpose is to probe the question of who is served (as well as who is implicated and mobilized) by refugee narratives that may occupy all too easily a generalized geopolitical imaginary: 'far from here'.

Contemporary theatricalized refugee narratives are often understood to communicate the profound trauma associated with forced displacement, even as this trauma is made 'meaningful' or 'recognizable' to audiences by the identification, however nebulous, of hope. To put it another way, such performances, whether or not they involve artists who are or who have been refugees, frequently rehearse some version of what I am calling a victimhood–hope dialectic. I examine some of the ways in which this affective dialectic functions in *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*, a small-scale physical-theatre piece by acclaimed Cape Town-based Magnet Theatre. Directed by Mark Fleishman, the production was devised in 2006 in response to South Africa's escalating refugee and forced-migrant crisis and has been performed internationally since.¹ This discussion chiefly takes account of its tour to London's Oval House Theatre in 2010. The work's oscillation between (or, it might be more accurate to say, interpenetration of) affects of victimhood and hope is signalled in its title: the intimate first-person voice suggesting interminability, rootlessness and exile, as well as propulsion, persistence and survival.

The creative impetus for *Every Year* was a commission to perform at the African Festival for Children and Youth Theatre in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in 2006. Since then it has been presented in South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland, Zambia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Argentina, India, Brazil, the UK and Sweden.²



FIG. 1 Jennie Reznek (left) and Faniswa Yisa (right) in *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*, dir. Mark Fleishman, photo: Mark Wessels.

Appropriately, the work uses a simple, portable set, emphasizing intimate transactions between two performers and their audiences. With minimal dialogue, Faniswa Yisa and Magnet Theatre co-director Jennie Reznek portray three main characters: Yisa plays a young girl, Aggie, while Reznek plays her mother as well as (in the opening scenes) her sister Ernestine, in addition to minor unnamed roles. Aggie and Ernestine's rural childhood in an unidentified African village, delightfully represented by a series of playful interactions between the rivalrous sisters (see Fig. 1), is interrupted by hooded militia that lay ruin to their home. The experiences of fleeing and being impelled to walk further and further from home are portrayed through recurring physical tropes. One of these is the evocative use of shoes as hand-held puppets; the actors animate the shoes tenderly, so that they walk side-by-side, or trace the curve of a body, or trudge dejected through sand and ash (see Fig. 2). Another consists of the mother's loving exertion in carrying Aggie on her back and the latter's reciprocal care in carefully wiping sweat from her mother's brow. On their treacherous journey, the pair hitch rides in trucks, their bodies rising and falling in choreographed waves as anonymous drivers negotiate pitted roads. Upon mother and daughter's arrival in Cape Town, an upbeat beach tune (contrasting with the mournfulness that otherwise characterizes Neo Muyanga's original score) sells the dubious promise of the city as 'a lovely place to be'.

Paying attention to questions of form in *Every Year* – in particular, its application of impressionistic generality over historical specificity – I want to investigate how, and for whom, victimhood and hope work in and through the production, constructing its



FIG. 2 Faniswa Yisa (left) and Jennie Reznick (right) in *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*, dir. Mark Fleishman, photo: Mark Wessels.

emotional and political tensions. My analysis assumes theatrical performance to inhere in material functions (as social practice) and symbolic functions (as representation); that it has what Mary Thomas Crane describes as an ‘enactive’ cognitive aspect, bringing social realities into being – in this, the transformative capacity of hope is particularly enmeshed – as well as a semantic cognitive aspect.³ From this standpoint, an examination of form is almost meaningless without reference to performance context. I am primarily concerned with one of the contact zones generated by the production, namely its transnational work with respect to audiences in London. My discussion is informed by my experience as an audience member of a performance at London’s Oval House Theatre in 2010 and by analysis of the theatre’s archival video footage. I aim to focus on the implications – cultural, political, artistic and, of course, affective – of the shift away from South Africa and proximate nations, where *Every Year* communicates in localized terms (sometimes to communities directly affected by the kind of tragedy it dramatizes), to a distant metropolitan community. That is to say, my purpose is to trace the question of who is served (as well as who is implicated and mobilized) by a refugee narrative that London audiences could relegate to a generalized geopolitical imaginary: ‘far from here’. To elucidate the particularities of this transnational relation, I contrast it with aspects of the work’s reception in South Africa, Namibia and Kerala, India.

The figure of the victim is an obvious (even if, as I will outline, not necessarily politically productive) consequence of the power relations imbricated in displacement. The stakes of asylum narratives readily coalesce in representations of the loss or absence of

homeland, belonging and agency, of coercive relationships wherein victims are made by persecutory force. This is a frame through which audiences recognize refugee identities in a range of performance modes, including the physical theatre of *Every Year*, though it is the verbatim theatre form, with its tendency towards a certain narrative rationality, which has especially lent itself to this taxonomy of asylum. In Britain, the performance location that is the main focus of this article, it was to the fore in the verbatim piece about a failed asylum seeker in Manchester, *I've Got Something to Show You* (2005),⁴ and in works by the London-based outreach network, Actors for Human Rights,⁵ as well as in the Testimonies Project South Africa, a 2011 collaboration at the Live Theatre in Newcastle. Similar preoccupations were evident in such international verbatim projects as Rustaveli Theatre's *Do We Look like Refugees* (2011), devised by British practitioner Alecky Blythe with Georgian refugees, and *Aftermath* (2009) by American practitioners Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, based upon interviews with Iraqi refugees. In Australia, Ros Horin's verbatim piece *Through the Wire* (2004) was constructed from interviews with detained asylum seekers and their Australian supporters; meanwhile, solo works devised by refugees formerly detained in Australia, including Towfiq Al-Qady's *Nothing but Nothing* (2005) and Shahin Shafaei's *Refugitive* (2002–4), offered alternatives to the documentary mode, but continued to centralize victimhood.⁶ The dominant emotional keys accessible to audiences of these performances are outrage, pity and (as Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo have noted) shame;⁷ such affects tend to solemnize victims, and they are particularly prominent when, as is so often the case, performance conditions ensure that works have the cross-cultural pedagogic function of telling refugee stories to mainly non-refugee theatre-goers.

Where and how, then, does hope figure? To start with, the critical impulse to identify hope is problematic; as Laura Edmondson asks,

when do invocations of hope turn into academic sugarcoating? When is the promise of transformation used as a theoretical salve for our unease about an unjust and genocidal planet where our economic privilege and material comfort depend upon a harsh world order that consigns millions of human beings to squalor and despair?⁸

Certain theatrical understandings of hope can be gleaned from the disciplines of social and clinical psychology, especially if we recognize theatre as, in Crane's words, 'embodied enaction' that constitutes the reality-making cognitive systems of practitioners and audiences.⁹ David B. Feldman and C. R. Snyder propose that hope is a common, crucial condition of *life meaning*, broadly defined as 'a global way of assessing or understanding one's life'; as they explain, 'believing that life is meaningful is associated with lower levels of negative emotions (especially anxiety and depression) and lower risk of mental illness'.¹⁰ For Feldman and Snyder, this hopeful thinking is 'a goal-directed cognitive construct',¹¹ and as such is fundamentally associated with acting in the world. A loss of self-determination – for my purposes, victimization – interrupts this cognitive agency. Anthropologist Ghassan Hage's theoretical extrication of hope from sentimentality is also instructive here: Hage argues that hope is not a whimsical idea but is vital to social success, and pays attention to ways in which 'feelings, discourses and practices articulated to hope permeate social life'.¹² Certainly, hope is a product of both imaginative capabilities and

social conditions; to 'have' hope is, I would suggest, to be able to *imagine* and in some capacity to *expect* a desired future. Hage argues, further, for the performative dimension of hope, identifying it as simultaneously an affective attribute, 'something that one has', and an affective practice, 'something that one does'.¹³ While, for Hage, the enactment, the *doing*, of hope does not describe points of contact between actors and spectators, his recognition of hope as social practice lends itself to an enquiry into its role in theatrical practice.

The trouble with victimhood

Before I map a practice of hope in relation to *Every Year*, I need to examine more fully the question of victimhood. Persuasive scholarly arguments have been put forward in the context of representations of trauma, crisis and displacement, that the trope of victimhood too often does little more than reinforce powerlessness and limit the range of stories that might represent refugees and other disempowered people. Reflecting upon her facilitation of performance projects with students in Canada, Julie Salverson warns against an 'erotics of injury', a mode of affective theatrical identification especially prevalent in mimetic verbatim performance, characterized by fascination with or even fetishization of suffering. Salverson contends that a 'preoccupation with the experience of loss and a privileging of trauma . . . provides an essential yet limiting framework that fixes testimony within a discourse of loss and the tragic',¹⁴ and furthermore ultimately 'sustains the psychic residues of violent histories, codifying the very powerlessness they seek to address'.¹⁵ With reference to protest performances by East Timorese refugee communities in Australia (mainly Sydney) during the struggle for independence from Indonesia, Amanda Wise notes that performances tended to be inscribed by Australian spectators in terms of a homogenized framework of victimhood, that these spectators 'were most receptive to a certain kind of East Timorese diasporic identity that emphasized the suffering of exile as a particularly moral state of being'.¹⁶ At the same time, Wise acknowledges the inescapable centrality of trauma and suffering within the East Timorese lifeworld; as she observes, 'any study of diasporic identity within a refugee community that omitted such an important issue is seriously deficient'.¹⁷ The latter comment underscores Salverson's 'essential yet limiting' description. If the relation implied by victimhood is that of subjugation to the empowered victimizer, then victims, as long as they are recognized as such, do not (perhaps cannot) undermine existing power structures; their victimhood might *signify* oppression, and even prompt the affective or active responses of supporters, but in and of itself victimhood may be an entirely acquiescent and non-productive identification.

In her study of trauma, memory and political community, Jenny Edkins similarly argues that if a traumatized individual is unable to reintegrate into political community, then their victimhood 'offers sympathy and pity in return for the surrender of any political voice'.¹⁸ Edkins's formulation of the modalities of agency after trauma is tied closely with the function of community and the mobilization of resistance. She argues, 'The concept of trauma oscillates between victimhood and protest and can be linked with or articulated to either'.¹⁹ The second component of this oscillation – protest – is, Edkins argues, a

direct consequence of the violence that trauma does to community (she is referring to political community, but her argument may be applied to differently formed imagined communities that have been subject to upheaval). The trauma that follows the abuse of power in a community, such as violent persecution that forces people from their homes, as represented in *Every Year*, breaks the boundary lines and relationships that constituted it. This fracturing is understood by Edkins in terms of traumatic *betrayal* of expectations (which, I contend, temporarily severs ties to an imagined, expected future – to hope), and this violence, she argues, demands a consequent reconstitution of community: ‘when our expectations of what community is, and what we are, are shown to be misplaced, then our view of ourselves has to be altered – or we have to fight for political change, in other words a reformulation of community’.²⁰ While it implies in its opening scenes the rupture of the affective tissue of an imagined community, *Every Year* offers little sense of what this community had consisted of; the protagonists are forced from their home and to the extent that their reintegration into new lives begins to occur, it is through the individual(ized) journey – the journey, indeed, invoked in the work’s first-person title. The two performers negotiate their new lives anonymously, even covertly; their isolation permeates the work. As far as Edkins’s argument for trauma’s function and articulation is concerned, then, *Every Year* might be oriented more towards victimhood than towards protest. Just as the identity and agency of the aggressors who appear briefly (in a haunting, dance-like performance by Reznek) at the beginning of the work remain masked, the collective agency required for effective reorientation, reintegration or protest seems absent. At least, this is the theatrical effect on a London stage; it should be noted that performances in South Africa, in front of audiences comprising some of the refugee and activist/support communities represented, will have been refracted through networks of local identifications and understandings. In other words, a reconstitution of community need not, in the local context, have been imagined in terms of what was happening on stage (the symbolic), but via the performance event more broadly (the social).

The complex transactional (artist–audience) implications of these critical perspectives on victimhood and representation are apparent when we take into account the fact that refugee narratives often serve one or the other (or both, as in the case of the widely performed *Every Year*) of two broad functions: representing marginalized communities within or for themselves (typically pursuing recuperative and/or therapeutic ends) and to or for broadly constituted host communities (typically pursuing cross-cultural pedagogic, empathic ends). When images and scenarios articulating to victimhood appear in refugee narratives, as they invariably do, the codification of powerlessness to which Salverson refers can operate in two ways: not only as a discourse perpetuated by a dominant audience of non-refugees (observing that which is other to themselves), but also by refugees and other marginalized peoples (seeing themselves represented on stage). For this reason, the reinforcing of social and political hierarchies that instrumentalize refugees’ lives in resettlement situations may be sanctioned from above *and* below; the urge to remember, represent and indeed pay respect to traumatic histories is easily consonant with the sustaining of certain ‘psychic residues’.²¹ By the same token, to the extent that representations of refugee stories produce

affects of hope, they do this in and for the different audience groups that receive them; hopefulness implicates the audience that is sensitized by it and, potentially, translates it into a challenge to enact the kinds of social action, the welcome, that it implies.

Specificity and generality, or truth and truthfulness

In so far as it is constructive to examine *Every Year* with reference to the testimonial model for the representation of refugee trauma that, as I have noted, has come to particular prominence in Britain, the United States and Australia – and in the context of a discussion of the work’s presence in London, it *is* constructive – it can be said that the piece works outside the limits of the verbatim ‘truth paradigm’ that formalizes and privileges precise modes of bearing witness to suffering. The story contained in *Every Year* is not a ‘true story’ in the testimonial sense, meaning that it does not ‘belong’ to any one witness or victim. As such, it circumvents a certain speaking–listening relation, one that is affixed to rationalized authenticity. Salverson observes that verbatim theatre often fails to problematize or at least reflect carefully enough on the relationship between the imaginative and the historical, and as such ‘maintains a preoccupation with experience – considering it authentic and untouchable – which both disregards the complexity of negotiating life in the midst of loss and presumes that approaching experience as transparent maintains an innocent listening’.²² This last point is worth pausing over: the ‘truth capital’ of testimony extends to the act of hearing it, so that the experience of being affected by testimony in the theatre can be glossed as ‘an innocent listening’.

With reference to his applied and community theatre work in Sri Lanka and Rwanda, James Thompson calls into question the paradigm that holds words – often the exact(ing) words of the testimonial or witnessing mode – to be the tools that express most faithfully experiences of trauma and displacement.²³ Seeking to theorize a shift in emphasis from *effect* to *affect* with regard to performance projects that take up the task of representing and/or therapeutically working through crisis, Thompson engages with Salverson’s critique of the ‘erotics of injury’ and echoes her call for performance projects to negotiate ‘the complex terrain of laughter, of the imagination, of the pleasure of encountering another person in the touching of worlds that is testimony’.²⁴ But for Thompson, Salverson’s investigation of the limits and possibilities of the witness/survivor testimonial model could be pushed further, so that we no longer assume that even ‘laughter, imagination and pleasure [must] return to . . . testimony’.²⁵ Similarly, Amanda Stuart Fisher astutely interrogates the assumed interconstitution of verbatim and theatrical authenticity: the idea, she argues, that ‘facts legitimate what it means to speak of the truth’ holds verbatim theatre within a framework that ‘struggles to take account of other “truths” . . . that fail to be disclosed by a literal and factual account of “what happened”’.²⁶ In attempting to represent trauma, *Every Year* eschews the literal/literate personal account for the immediate specificity of the body. In doing so, it pursues a non-factual *truthfulness*.²⁷

The production was inspired by an art-therapy process for refugee children initiated in Johannesburg by Glynis Clacherty, and her resulting book, *The Suitcase Stories: Refugee*

Children Reclaim Their Identities (2006). The characters of Aggie and Ernestine (who does not survive the violent attack) attest to this influence, standing, it may be said, as generalized composites of African children who have suffered displacement, loss of family members, or worse. In performances of *Every Year* in London, the child characters can be seen to articulate a broadly pedagogic project of international awareness-raising, potentially provoking transnational ethical responsibility. The affective charge associated with representations of children is profound, but also profoundly ambivalent: as well as embodying resilience and regeneration and hope for an imagined future, a child possesses all the essential traits of victimhood – vulnerability, blamelessness, powerlessness. There is a great deal at stake in the portrayal of a child by an adult performer; in refugee narratives, such representation risks being received as presumptive, sentimental or even emotionally manipulative. In a work like *Every Year*, which operates outside the exacting mould of verbatim, adopting the perspective of a child might permit a certain narrative abstraction. But while the internationally transmissible and almost universally affective image of the innocent child tends to push discourse on asylum beyond strict national(ist) delineations and pejorative stereotypes – in other words, although children challenge the international community to think differently about the issue of asylum – children around the world are not exempt to any significant degree from the asylum policies and procedures of host nations, much less from persecution and violence. It seems to be paradoxically true that, on the one hand, the suffering of children exceeds historico-political contingencies while, on the other, the representation of children in stories of traumatic displacement is ethically justified only inasmuch as the specificity of their suffering is not occluded.

Yisa and Reznik weave English and French through their performances, at times constructing an overlapping or echoing language effect through simultaneous translation. Words (in particular, names) convey key narrative points, but the actors' bodies instantiate their words, which are few. Where words are used, they prove an insufficient means of connecting and making meaning in the face of trauma. During her English-language lessons in Cape Town, Aggie spits out monosyllables, naming herself and the various parts of her face, resituating her new subjectivity. This parallels the identification processes that mother and daughter undertake on their arrival in South Africa, whereupon an official form interpolates them as answers to a standard formula of questions: 'name', 'address', 'where do you come from?'. *Every Year* seems to suggest that if factual testimony must affix to official markers of identity, and indeed, if it must be spoken in a language that is not one's own, then it can only offer an incomplete and inadequate account of the experiences of loss and displacement. More devastating in its inadequacy is Aggie's insistent naming of her dead sister, Ernestine. If this is, in Hage's terms, an affective practice of hope, it serves little more than a child's frantic impulse to conjure back the dead. Aggie writes numerous letters to her sister from Cape Town, only to discover later, to her horror and grief, that her mother has been stashing them in a bag, unsent. Aggie finally burns the letters in a small bowl as she relinquishes hope of reuniting with Ernestine; this intimate ceremony signifies the end of Aggie's futile (non-)communication with the dead, and allows her to kindle another practice of hope, now for her own lived future.

The only geographical reference point in *Every Year* is Cape Town, the place of arrival for Aggie and her mother. Signified by set designer Julia Anastasopoulos's device of a geometric metal frame of an urban high-rise skyline, the city is a frenetic mass of risk and opportunity. But aside from its identification of Cape Town, the production leaves open the question of geography, thereby offering an 'every story' of African displacement. The narrative is malleable, presenting ideas and affects, rather than personal, verifiable histories. This malleability is, perhaps, a useful trait in a work that has toured to several of the African nations that are sources of refugees. It is in its touring outside Africa that the work's representational problems become most evident. *Every Year* runs the risk of reproducing, in London and elsewhere, a pan-African subjectivity inhering in a generalized combination of oppression, crisis and victimhood. The work's 'story of the elephants' seems particularly illustrative of this: the actors tell a moral tale in which herds of elephants that formerly roamed freely across non-specific regions of the continent find themselves literally cut off from kin as a consequence of the erection of guarded political borders. This naive analogy for complex and often violent nationalist territoriality is, in one sense, simply a benign sign that the work was inspired by a creative-therapy project for children – the elephants' story is told with the sentimental anthropomorphism of a children's narrative. But for adult audiences, such as those present at Oval House Theatre in 2010, it might have functioned more ambivalently. The elephants, as analogues for the people of Africa, are figured as victims of the uninvited encroachment of civilization, crystallized in political borders that cut across ancient migratory paths and kinship links. 'Authentic Africa' and modernity are pitted in opposition, and consequently a generalized image of the continent as a scarred landscape and a lost paradise is reinforced. To the extent that their story is held to correspond with that of the elephants, Aggie and her mother slot all too easily into an international audience's generic moral imaginary: the pair are the victims of an Africa that is always and by definition in crisis and mourning.

Hope: performing in whose interests?

If, as I argue, the characterization of refugee victimhood may be said to function dialectically with the affective work of hope in *Every Year*, it becomes important to consider *how* hope appears, and *for whom*. I have touched on the first part of this question, the *how*, in the context of Aggie's private mourning ceremony, but it can be examined in more depth with reference to Thompson's nuanced recuperation of the role and function of *beauty* in performance projects in contexts of war, crisis and displacement. Thompson makes the case for a theoretical and practical concern with 'how and why [beauty] might emerge from the very spaces in which conventional wisdom suggests it is least expected', maintaining that a disavowal of it can delimit a performance work's impact and power.²⁸ The key way in which hope manifests in *Every Year* is through its performative grace, its beauty. I outlined at the beginning of this article some of the recurring dance-like devices, enacted by the two performers with care and precision, which express the physical toil of travelling vast distances. In a Cape Town scene that it is tempting to describe as a performative distillation of Zygmunt Bauman's thesis in *Wasted Lives*,²⁹ the actors slowly wave rubbish bags in the air, until Aggie's mother places one over her head and torso,



FIG. 3 Faniswa Yisa (left) and Jennie Reznick (right) in *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*, dir. Mark Fleishman, photo: Mark Wessels.

and draws another up to her waist; cocooned top and bottom, lying across the stage, she rolls one way and then another. This is a poignant, and indeed beautiful, representation of indignity and of disappearance, of being one among a vast displaced and homeless population in Cape Town. And certainly, beauty and hope come unequivocally to the fore in the scenes in the work of dance and play that portray easy intimacy between, initially, Aggie and her sister Ernestine (see Fig. 3) and, later, Aggie and her mother.

The second part of my enquiry into hope in *Every Year*, the question of *for whom* it functions, concerns the different ways in which the artist–audience relation manifested in performances. Hage’s theorization of hope is oriented towards its function for those who possess and practise it, rather than for those who witness its possibilities in the (theatricalized) lives of others. It follows, then, that where hope appears in refugee narratives, it is important that refugee communities, who fare poorly under what Hage terms the unequal ‘distribution of hope’ in society,³⁰ experience some of its affective consequences. As a work that has been presented in African nations that have significant populations of refugees and internally displaced peoples, it is likely that the hopeful work, the beauty, of *Every Year* functioned in some capacity for those it sought broadly to represent. In order to articulate how it may have done so, I want to return to Feldman and Snyder’s proposition that hope is a crucial component of *life meaning*, and that the cognitive essence of hope is goal-oriented thinking. They argue that this thinking can be distilled into two components: pathways and agency. The first is a ‘perceived capacity to produce cognitive routes to one’s goals’,³¹ while the second is mobilized when ‘a person is

sufficiently motivated to actually initiate and sustain movement along pathways toward desired goals'.³² While Feldman and Snyder centralize the pursuit of goals, they are interested in the cognitive belief-systems that instigate these, rather than in action per se, and it is for this reason, I would suggest, that their model offers a useful means of examining transactions of hope in theatre. If *Every Year* generated hopeful affects for audience members with experience of displacement, it did so via imaginative means, potentially stimulating certain cognitive pathways and agencies.

As far as the production's transnational contact with London audiences is concerned, the affective work of hope becomes somewhat more problematic, ethically and politically. The problematics can perhaps best be encapsulated by the question whether, for international audiences, hope serves interests beyond those of self-interest. The frequency with which refugee theatre generally is marketed and received by critics as 'ultimately uplifting' or 'inspirational' suggests that the purpose or consequence of hope is formulated, perhaps pragmatically, in terms of how it induces audiences to feel; certainly, *Every Year* is described on Magnet Theatre's website as 'uplifting theatre that celebrates the ability of human beings to heal and regain a sense of dignity through the power of the imagination'.³³ Does theatre that deals with trauma have to make attempts at or intimations of an uplifting trajectory, a hopeful conclusion, in order to justify its artistic, narrative or even moral purpose? The robust international marketplace for 'redemptive' stories of trauma in various artistic forms might lead us to conclude that this is so: that the difficult emotional terrain of trauma is made comprehensible and *meaningful* to the extent that it generates hope in/for spectators. (This, indeed, is an implication that might be extrapolated from Feldman and Snyder's thesis on hope, to which meaning-making is key.) If it operates with this sort of representational use-value, hope effectively becomes an emotional commodity – in Hage's terms, 'something that one has'³⁴ – the implications of which are troubling in so far as theatre about refugee trauma can rehearse familiar delineations between Western (consuming) self and non-Western (victimized) other.

Reviews of *Every Year* go some way towards unravelling the shifting conditions of its reception, particularly the different affective meanings that were attached to it. Several South African reviewers contextualized the piece by acknowledging the renown of the director, Fleishman, and his use of expressive physical language. An online review by a theatre academic cited an essay by Fleishman in order to situate *Every Year* in terms of Fleishman's view that dance contains 'the idea of untranslatability, of being able to house things that language can't'.³⁵ A reviewer in Namibia commented that Reznick's work has 'long entered the psyche of the theatre world in our region'.³⁶ The reviewer compares the production with other works by Magnet Theatre, including the outdoor play *Onnest'bo*, about the forced removal of more than 60,000 non-whites from Cape Town's District Six in the 1970s under apartheid, and the historical play *Cargo*, about slavery in the Western Cape.³⁷ A South African reviewer offers a detailed discussion of the work's local resonances:

[*Every Year*] is salutary to South African audiences. For when mother and daughter arrive in Cape Town – "our turf" – they are utterly lost in the South African babel,

without even the lingua franca of English to help them. They do not understand, nor are they understood. The Capetonians (of all race groups) that they interact with don't come across as a very sympathetic lot. In fact, quite the opposite: our fictional compatriots give voice to the xenophobic resentment of many South Africans when it comes to citizens of other African countries living within our borders. At school, while she stutters her way through class, Agi [*sic*] has to put up with taunts of 'Amakwerekwere!' Her mother receives the same insult as she is shoved from pillar to post while trying desperately to find a Home Affairs office where she can obtain refugee status.³⁸

Another South African reviewer picked up on local themes, citing recent xenophobic attacks on Rwandan-born refugees in South Africa, and the horrific case of Mozambican man Ernesto Nhamuave, who was burned alive during the fortnight of violence that began in Johannesburg in 2008 following the eviction of non-nationals from their homes. This critic identified the work's physical language in particularized terms, describing a scene in which a 'dance with pangas, known to be used in xenophobic attacks, describes the horror of genocide'.³⁹ For these reviewers, the production reflected their own society's most urgent challenges, and its affective impact is refracted through all-too-familiar tragedies.

In contrast, London reviewers were more likely to mention that Reznick studied at the renowned Lecoq School in Paris than to refer to South Africa's internal and cross-border crises. While reviews can only be indicative of broader reception, it seems fairly clear that *Every Year* was read along more generalized lines when it toured to London. Despite the guidance of a thoughtful introductory note in the programme by Oval House Theatre's producer, Ben Evans, drawing attention to South African theatre, outlining South Africa's political struggles and refugee crises and highlighting intersections with British politics and society,⁴⁰ reviewers tended to regard *Every Year* as a universal story of loss and hope. The *British Theatre Guide* review glossed the work as a 'story of a young African refugee who flees her homeland and finds shelter in South Africa'.⁴¹ The conditions implied by the term 'shelter' in the context of alienating, cosmopolitan Cape Town, what might be called the ethics and politics of shelter, are not discussed. Significantly, the same reviewer evaluated the work's meaningfulness with reference to its hopefulness: 'two performers tell a little girl's tragic story, but tell it with such life-affirming intensity that, rather than the heavy political study one might expect, this is a joyous celebration'.⁴² Another London reviewer described the work as a 'harrowing and yet uplifting meditation on the plight of the refugee in the modern world', before adding, 'In the light of current discussions about immigration to these shores, this is a topical and humbling play with an important, timely message, albeit one transposed to a South African setting'.⁴³ This comment situates the work with reference to the UK's refugee issues, to the extent that this becomes the implied originary context for such issues; South African politics are held as secondary. A review by an independent London blogger made no reference to refugees, instead praising the work's general embodied affects: 'a production that uses minimum dialogue, maximum body language and physicality, yet conveys universal themes that are powerful and resonant'.⁴⁴ None of the London reviews I accessed framed the work with reference to apartheid or post-apartheid tensions, much

less to South Africa's current refugee and migrant crisis. On the contrary, the work's absence of an explicit historico-political narrative framework proved a barrier for the London *Time Out* reviewer, who described the work as 'an emblem of dispossession rather than a drama' and concluded that its 'trajectory, from horror through loss to redemption, is drawn with rudimentary brushstrokes'.⁴⁵ The latter comment hints at a certain weariness with the very affective dialectic I am attempting to trace in this essay, and, perhaps, an unwillingness to engage with what the South African reviewer cited above recognized as Fleishman's ongoing concern with – and attempts to overcome – 'untranslatability'.

Critical responses to performances at the 2009 International Theatre Festival of Kerala were markedly more informed in terms of political and social contexts, suggesting that the despecifying described above may in this instance have had more to do with viewing practices in London than with viewing practices outside Africa generally. Writers in Kerala uniformly referred to Fleishman's theatrical and academic work, and drew attention to his artistic, scholarly and political concerns. The latter information was drawn from Fleishman's lecture at the Festival and from interviews, indicating that the Kerala Festival offered an enriching environment for engaged discussion and reception of the work. It is tempting to argue that the apparent journalistic interest in refugee politics reflects a greater local familiarity with its urgency; a writer for *The Hindu* discussed the play's politics with reference to the UNHCR's '2008 Global Trends' report, and drew connections with regional concerns by noting the vast numbers of displaced people in Pakistan and citing UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres's comment: 'The overwhelming burden of displacement is borne by developing countries . . . About 80 per cent of refugees are in the developing world'.⁴⁶ Anglophone critical responses to *Every Year* in other locations are elusive. In May 2011 the work was performed in Malmö, Sweden, as part of the 17th World Congress of ASSITEJ (Association internationale du théâtre pour l'enfance et la jeunesse/International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People). The festival sought actively to situate itself in terms of 'globality' and 'diversity', hosting work from Africa, Asia, Australia, North and South America and Europe, coalescing under the motto 'building bridges, crossing borders'. These aims are obviously aligned closely with Magnet Theatre's concern – acute in *Every Year* – with the role of imagination and performative play in transforming the lives of displaced children. The work's presence at the congress does not appear to have been reviewed or discussed in English-language print or online media;⁴⁷ while this attenuates its potential to enter into a broader public discourse as a cultural artefact, it also serves to focus the key – and ephemeral – function of a theatre festival as a celebration and convocation of artists and audiences.

Asylum seekers, refugees and other displaced people represent the crux of some of the most intractable problems in an interconnected world; an 'involuntary' permutation of transnational mobility, their requests for protection produce some of the most charged contexts for region-to-region contact across scandalous gaps in life opportunity. At the same time, the theatrical contexts in which refugee stories are told (and made recognizable) are intimate and particular; they can translate the region-to-region into the face-to-face. Audiences, naturally, encounter such theatre at a certain time in a certain

place, and it is meaningful with reference to this immediacy. Magnet Theatre's *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking* removes itself from obvious historical particularity, functioning instead to produce, first and foremost, an intensely emotional engagement. But this emotional work feeds directly into readings that have varied significantly according to different receptive contexts. The spectre of victimhood is ever-present, the artists offering an expression of sorrow and an attempt to communicate for African refugees; at the same time, the work is propelled, and indeed made purposeful, by the practice of hope. The implications of these affects are at once problematic, as far as location-specific political and emotional ends are concerned, and essential to the storytelling purpose in any performance context. They are mutually constitutive strands within the work, presenting possibilities for engagement and response in a range of international contact zones. The affective dialectic that I have traced here might, in the end, confirm the tenacity of hope – that it appears whenever victimhood does – as well as the tenacity of theatrical productions such as *Every Year* that seek, country by country, night by night, to transform hope into social change.

NOTES

- 1 South Africa receives more asylum applications than any other Refugee Convention signatory nation in the world; viewed in this light, *Every Year* can be seen as a response to the enormous challenges faced by the nation in its role as host to around 85,000 asylum seekers and refugees and hundreds of thousands more displaced people unassisted by the UNHCR. 2011 UNHCR Country Operations Profile – South Africa, *UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency*, 2011, www.unhcr.org/pages/49e485aa6.html, accessed 10 February 2011.
- 2 To date, *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking* has been presented at the African Festival for Children and Youth Theatre, Yaoundé, Cameroon (2006); National Festival of the Arts, Grahamstown (2007); French Cultural Centres in Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Malawi, Swaziland; Franco-Mozambican Cultural Centre, Maputo; Baxter Theatre, Cape Town (2007); Hilton Arts Festival, KwaZulu Natal (2008); London International Festival of Theatre (LIFT) (2008); Proyecto Festival, Argentina (2009); Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees, Oudtshoorn (2009); International Theatre Festival of Kerala (2009); Juice Festival for Young Audiences, Newcastle, UK (2009); Aardklop National Arts Festival, Potchefstroom (2009); Oval House Spring Theatre season, London (2010); World Congress International Drama in Education Association (IDEA), Belem, Brazil (2010); Teatro Pombas Urbanos, São Paulo, Brazil (2010); ASSITEJ World Congress, Malmö, Sweden (2011). It had been scheduled for performance in 2011 at the Imbewu Contemporary South African Theatre Festival, New York, but the Festival was postponed until 2012.
- 3 Mary Thomas Crane, 'What Was Performance?', *Criticism*, 42, 2 (2001), pp. 169–87, here pp. 170–1.
- 4 For a discussion of this piece see Alison Jeffers, 'Looking for Estrafil: Witnessing "Refugitive" Bodies in *I've Got Something to Show You*', in Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, eds., *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 91–106.
- 5 Verbatim works by Actors for Human Rights (a constituent strand of Ice and Fire Theatre Company) include their flagship production, *Asylum Monologues* (2006–), and *Asylum Dialogues* (2008–), both scripted by Sonja Linden.
- 6 For a discussion of Towfiq Al-Qady's work see Emma Cox, 'The Intersubjective Witness: Trauma Testimony in Towfiq Al-Qady's *Nothing but Nothing: One Refugee's Story*', *RIDE: Research in Drama Education*, 13, 2 (2008), pp. 193–8. For a discussion of Shahin Shafaei's work see Emma Cox, 'The Citation of Injury: Regarding the Exceptional Body', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 33, 4 (2009), pp. 459–72.

- 7 Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo discuss the centrality of shame in responses to theatre about asylum seekers and refugees in Australia in a chapter on performance and asylum in *Performance and Cosmopolitics: Cross-cultural Transactions in Australasia* (Houndmills, Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 201–4.
- 8 Laura Edmondson, 'Of Sugarcoating and Hope', *Drama Review*, 51, 2 (2007), pp. 7–10, here p. 7.
- 9 Crane, 'What Was Performance?', p. 171.
- 10 David B. Feldman and C. R. Snyder, 'Hope and the Meaningful Life: Theoretical and Empirical Associations between Goal-Directed Thinking and Life Meaning', *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 24, 3 (2005), pp. 401–21, here p. 402.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 2003), p. 9.
- 13 Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, p. 10.
- 14 Julie Salverson, 'Change on Whose Terms? Testimony and an Erotics of Injury', *Theater*, 31, 3 (2001), pp. 119–25, here p. 122.
- 15 Julie Salverson, 'Transgressive Storytelling or an Aesthetic of Injury: Performance, Pedagogy and Ethics', *Theatre Research in Canada*, 20, 1 (1999), pp. 35–51, here p. 35.
- 16 Amanda Wise, *Exile and Return among the East Timorese* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), p. 119.
- 17 Ibid, p. 93.
- 18 Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 9.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Salverson, 'Transgressive', p. 35.
- 22 Salverson, 'Change on Whose Terms?', p. 121.
- 23 James Thompson, *Performance Affects: Applied Theatre and the End of Effect* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 139.
- 24 Salverson, 'Change on Whose Terms?', p. 124.
- 25 Thompson, *Performance Affects*, p. 139.
- 26 Amanda Stuart Fisher, 'Trauma, Authenticity and the Limits of Verbatim', *Performance Research*, 16, 1 (2011), pp. 112–22, here p. 113.
- 27 By invoking the term *truthfulness* here I follow a distinction made by Charlotte Delbo, a Holocaust survivor and member of the French resistance, that holds truthfulness to be different from factuality; in the epigraph of her poetic Holocaust memoir *Auschwitz and After* (published in English in 1985), Delbo writes, 'Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful'. Charlotte Delbo, *Days and Memory*, trans. and preface Rosette Lamont (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001).
- 28 Thompson, *Performance Affects*, p. 139.
- 29 Zygmunt Bauman weaves literal and metaphorical understandings of societal waste to frame his discussion of the ways in which certain human lives are comprehensively excluded from the benefits of global modernity. Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2004).
- 30 Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, p. 17.
- 31 Feldman and Snyder, 'Hope and the Meaningful Life', p. 406.
- 32 Ibid., p. 407.
- 33 Magnet Theatre, Productions: www.magnettheatre.co.za/productions, accessed 11 March 2011.
- 34 Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, p. 10.
- 35 Quoted in Anton Krueger, review of *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*, National Arts Festival, Grahamstown, *OpStage*, 2 July 2007, http://litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&cause_id=1270&news_id=18985&cat_id=245, accessed 10 February 2011.

- 36 Liz Frank, review of *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*, National Theatre Namibia, Windhoek, *Sister Namibia*, 2008, www.thefreelibrary.com/Every+year,+every+day+I+am+walking.-a0184550000, accessed 9 February 2011.
- 37 Ibid., np.
- 38 Chris Thurman, 'Theatre that Transcends Language and Borders', review of *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*, 29 March 2008, www.businessday.co.za, accessed 11 February 2011.
- 39 Astrid Stark, review of *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking, The Magnet*, Cape Town, 11 February 2010, <http://astridstark1.wordpress.com/2010/02/11/theatre-review-every-year-every-day-i-am-walking/>, accessed 9 February 2011.
- 40 Programme Note, *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*, 23 February–13 March 2010, Oval House Theatre, London.
- 41 Howard Loxton, review of *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking* at Oval House Theatre, London, *British Theatre Guide*, 2010, www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/everyyear-rev.htm, accessed 9 February 2011.
- 42 Ibid., np.
- 43 Lindsey Johns, review of *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking* at Oval House Theatre, London, *Afridiziak*, 1 March 2010, www.afridiziak.com/theatrenews/reviews/review-every-year-every-day-i-am-walking.html, accessed 8 February 2011.
- 44 Belinda Otas, review of *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking*, Oval House Theatre, London, *Belinda Otas: Telling It like It Is!*, 3 March 2010, <http://belindaotas.com/?p=1639>, accessed 15 March 2011.
- 45 Brian Logan, review of *Every Year, Every Day, I Am Walking* at Oval House Theatre, London, *Time Out London*, 4 March 2010, www.timeout.com/london/theatre/event/176935/every-year-every-day-i-am-walking, accessed 10 February 2011.
- 46 Quoted in K. Santhosh, 'Physical Theatre at Its Best', *The Hindu*, 22 December 2009, p. 4.
- 47 The international research database resource, Dow Jones Factiva, which encompasses 28,500 sources from two hundred countries in a number of media, including newspapers, journals, magazines, television and radio, contains no record of performances of *Every Year* at the ASSITEJ Congress.

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