Refuge in a Moving World
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The empty space: Performing migration at the Good Chance Theatre in Calais

Tom Bailey

During 2017, theatre maker Tom Bailey was Leverhulme Artist in Residence at UCL’s Migration Research Unit. The following chapter contains two parts. The first is an interview with Tom regarding theatre work in the ‘Jungle’ in Calais. The second contains extracts from an artistic ‘field guide’, made with photographer Tom Hatton, presented at the UCL Festival of Culture 2017.

What was the Good Chance Theatre?

The Good Chance Theatre was a community space set up in summer 2015 in the Calais ‘Jungle’ camp. It was established by two playwrights from the UK, Joe Robertson and Joe Murphy, and received extensive support from established theatres in London like the Royal Court and the Young Vic. Gradually, it grew as an organization with an aim to provide a space for migrants to engage with expressive arts, to provide a safe space where people can work creatively together, and to be a voice in the media advocating for the rights of refugees within and beyond the UK.

How were you involved with the organization?

I worked as a visiting artist running workshops and making performance with migrants across 2015–16.

What kind of work did you do there?

It varied from time to time. No one day was the same. Most days I would run a theatre workshop that would last from one to three hours. The work would range from theatre games, physical work, massage, song work, ensemble movement and play. My aim was not to direct a show but to provide a space where people could express themselves spontaneously in a safe environment, connect with others in ways they may not have done
so before, to build trust among the group, and to provide dramatic avenues
for unexpressed tensions and experiences. As I mentioned, no one day
was the same. It depended on who was in the theatre space, and what the
energy was in the space. In a workshop context like this, one soon found
that coming with a plan and trying to execute it was a recipe for failure. It
was about trying to capture the mood of the people in the room and see,
with guidance, what spontaneous collective action would emerge.

What was the theatre space?

The theatre space was called ‘the dome’ – a geodesic dome donated
to Good Chance. It became the focus point for all activities. In the camp,
people from different nationalities tended to live near those from the
same country, with different areas of the camp named after the main
nationality of the people living there. The dome was situated within what
was called the Afghan area of the camp. It could hold more than 300 peo-
ple when full. Previously, before the dome came, activities happened in
the Sudanese area of the camp.

Who used the dome?

The dome was open almost every day, from sunrise to sundown.
There was a policy of always welcoming people; it was a space of no
exclusion. Across the day, there was a roster of activities. There were vis-
itors from over 40 different nationalities – many Iraqis, Iranians, Syrians,
Kurds, Libyans, Eritreans, Ethiopians, to name a few. One aim of the dome
was to be a place where people could meet new people in a safe space,
develop friendship through creativity. There was occasionally aggrava-
tion between different groups, but this was to be expected when living
in a squalid camp with such structural and infrastructural limitations.¹

What kind of activities went on?

Across the day, there were activities ranging from painting, sculpt-
ing, martial arts, singing, theatre making, music, film nights, community
meetings, volleyball, football and many more things. Several refugees
with experience in martial arts ran workshops themselves, while I ran
basic capoeira workshops as well.

It should be noted that this all took place in a context where many
people were understandably in states of lethargy and ill health. Not only
were they exposed to the constant, hacking sea wind across the Calais
dunes, but the wind also carried rather nauseating fumes from nearby
Calais industrial estates. Nutrition was limited and there was no exer-
cise programme within the camp. People were, needless to say, in a very
fragile state, dealing with undiagnosed traumas from their various jour-
neys, and the challenges of living in the camp itself.² We had to be acutely
aware of this when working within the theatre.
How did people express themselves within the theatre?
Theatre has different meanings and importance in different countries around the world. In Britain, theatre has been very close to a collective form of national consciousness since Elizabethan times, and British theatre tends to be literary and text-based because of this. In various European countries this is different – and innovations in France, Poland and Russia across the twentieth century have made strong developments in the use of the body to make theatre.

Within the context of the ‘Jungle’, we were primarily interacting with people who were either from societies where theatre was not immediately present or where it was not ‘accepted’ on religious, cultural and/or political grounds; in other cases, they were from societies where, for various reasons, they had little interaction with theatre. Most, however, came with experience of song, music and a cultural dance form. These tended to be the primary forms of performance in the dome.

Did you link up with theatres in other refugee camps?
There were other companies that visited, who had in some cases extensive experience of arts work in refugee camps. But many of the artists running work were new to this work environment, and consequently found it very difficult. Everything in the Jungle was ad hoc. This was not an officially organized refugee camp, and had no centrally organizing charity. It was mainly run by volunteers, many of whom were learning on the job and did as best as they could.

Performance in this context worked very differently. As far as I understand, theatre shows in other refugee camps (for instance, those managed by United Nations agencies) are often more organized affairs. Here, our understanding was growing as time went on, as the camp changed continuously, as the theatre constantly had to justify its existence in the camp. Good Chance had to daily argue (to sceptics, media, locals, and so on) that theatre and well-being were as important as the essentials of food, clothing and shelter.

What is the use of performance in a refugee context?
I approach the words performance and performativity with caution, because I feel that in academia performance has taken on different connotations and meanings. I understand performance as bodily action. I do theatre for many reasons, but at the core is my belief in witnessing the transformative, expressive power of collective bodily action. My theatre workshops had three functions: to act as a safe environment where play, instinct and spontaneity could emerge; to provide a space for physical exercise and training; and to work together in making theatre performance. In this context, I feel that performance work can lead a participant
to be in greater contact with themselves, their instinct, here and now. It is a ‘presencing’; an articulation of where you are, as a human, right now. It is an invitation to go deeper into yourself as a human with other humans. I do not wish to theorize about the real value of this performance work to refugees, because it is different to everyone. I do not view it as a magical interventionist tool that can somehow alleviate suffering. People in the Jungle were mostly bored shitless because there was nothing to do, and theatre could do little to alleviate that. But theatre offered a new way, perhaps a kind of ‘third space’, of relating to each other amid the boredom.

Nor am I qualified to say that my theatre work was intentionally therapeutic (there are many companies whose work is far more in this area). Many refugees did not like the work that we were doing and walked away. But for those who were in need of what we were offering, I feel that performance plays a valuable role in a context of what I have come to call ‘suspended identity’. Many of the refugees we were working with were stateless: unrecognized people wandering across continents – some for days, some for weeks, some for years – separated from a homeland, from family, from friends … all with a yet-unarrived-at destination, a place of suspended ending of the journey, a place of possible fulfilment of something. Above all, the Jungle was a space of limbo, temporary suspension of identity and personhood; the work of theatre could assist in the processing of this identity-suspension, in the witnessing and recognition of it by self and others in the act of doing something imaginatively together. It was not about ‘performing one’s journey’ or returning to a site of trauma to process it; it was about opening awareness to the here, the now, the emotion in your body, the partner’s hands touching your hands with acceptance. Perhaps the subtext of this work was:

I know that you have been many places, and you still have somewhere to go. Life is on hold. Here, in the Jungle, is not the place you want to be. Here is not what you want to be, or how you want to live your life. Things are shit. But let’s find a way, through moving and playing together, to turn the shitiness, for a moment, here and now, on its head.

*What were the most challenging aspects of working in this context?*

1) The wind. The Calais dunes are very exposed to the wind. The wind and rain gets everywhere. Everything sinks into the sand and mud. The best thing about the dome was that it was the only public space that was free and open and out of the wind.

2) Leaving. Working closely with people in a fragile situation, you form strong attachments. It’s very difficult to leave, when leaving is so easy for some and so difficult for others.
3) Telling people about the UK. A refugee’s primary reason for being in Calais was to get to the UK. Many had travelled thousands of miles with the belief that the UK was better, kinder, freer than other European countries, and that education was free and that jobs would be available. Knowing that this is not the case, it is hard to try and persuade someone, tactfully, that this might not be true – especially when they have travelled so far.

4) Gaining trust. There are so many visitors to the Jungle. Western visitors. Coming and going as easy as birds, looking around, surveying, photographing, recording, documenting. It is hard for refugees to know who is really there to help, or who is a fly-by tourist, or who could be an undercover police officer, or who could be catching your face on their camera for their arts project or academic study. This was an environment where hidden identity is important. As per the EU-law Dublin ‘first country of asylum’ regime, you are supposed to claim asylum at the first safe country you arrive at. If the UK government were to find evidence that you had been in Calais, or Italy (where many people were fingerprinted against their wishes), you could be denied entry. In trying to work closely, sensitively, artistically with people in this context, gaining their trust is very difficult. And without trust, theatre can’t happen.

What of the Good Chance Theatre now?

As many will know, the Jungle was demolished by the French authorities in 2015, rebuilt and demolished again in March 2016. The dome had to be taken down and the land cleared in spring 2016. In recognition of its work, in summer 2016 there was an ‘Encampment’ Festival at the Southbank Centre in London, celebrating refugee performance, and the company has been supported by the Young Vic. The two playwrights who started the theatre, along with director Stephen Daldry, went on to create a Young Vic play called The Jungle in 2017, entailing a kind of documentary interpretation of the daily activities of the camp. Although there is no dome in Calais any more, the Good Chance Theatre organization has since developed other refugee-related projects both in the UK and abroad.

What did you do at the UCL Migration Research Unit (MRU) during your residency?

During my residency, along with a creative team I developed a new theatre show called Zugunruhe. I spent time engaging with a number of researchers from different disciplines to try and understand both human and bird migration. During my research, I became very interested in how the discourses around human migration and animal migration are seemingly
so separate. So I ended up asking, through the artwork, how exploring bird migration might offer audiences fresh perspectives on human migration.

The show went on to premiere at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2018, where it received critical acclaim and a Herald Angel Award. It has since toured in both the UK and internationally – most recently in Cologne, Germany.

During my time at UCL, as part of the development of Zugunruhe, I also presented an audio-walk experience at the UCL Grant Museum of Zoology. This was created with sound designer Simon Whetham. The experience explored the compositional intertwining of bird songs and human songs (recorded in the Jungle migrant camp). Below, I present some extracts from the ‘field guide’ that was created to accompany the walk, made in collaboration with artist and photographer Tom Hatton.

**Field Notes: Zone Industrielle des Dunes**

Text by Tom Bailey

Images from Calais by Tom Hatton. Tom Hatton is an artist based in London. His project NOW HERE traces the lives of asylum seekers within and around the Calais refugee camp. The work was selected for the Bloomberg New Contemporaries, 2017.

![Figure 15.1](image-url) Untitled photograph. © Tom Hatton. Calais.
Welcome to the Zone Industrielle des Dunes. This guide will take you on a short walk through some of the popular viewing spots.

Situated close to the Réserve Naturelle Nationale du Platier d’Oye on the coast of Nord Pas de Calais, it’s home to a vast number of migratory birds.

Geography and irony: These sand dunes were once the killing fields of World War II. They now accommodate a bird wetland, an unofficial refugee camp and chemical factories.

The architecture of war still sleeps beneath the beaches: pill boxes, rusted machine parts, chains, concrete shells.

A landscape of sand and water twisted and gouged by explosions, like the body of a dead animal in a desert.

Above this, dead scrub of stinted grass, where nature tries to grow but fails. Water and air bleed into each other.

A little way back from this: Small, silent villages, shuttered and dead in winter. Open, yet silent, in summer. A holiday land. Long, flat roads snake through fields; little concrete rivers into concrete horizons.

Few really stay here.

Figure 15.2  Untitled photograph. © Tom Hatton. Calais.
Species: Little Ringed Plover (*Charadrius dubius*)

The Little Ringed Plover is a small plover. The genus name *Charadrius* is a Latin word for a yellow bird. This comes from Ancient Greek *kharadrios*, meaning ‘a bird found in river valleys’.

Conservation status: Least Concern.

Song: Gives a clear ‘peeoo’ as common call, a far-carrying sound for a small bird. A short ‘peeu’ or ‘cru’ and insistent ‘pip’ in alarm are usually heard.

Migration: Between sub-Saharan Africa in winter and Northern Europe in summer. Geolocation methods have shown that the winter flight of the Little Ringed Plover differs from that of many other long-distance migrating shorebirds. The Plover prefers to make multiple stop overs within the Middle East.

Figure 15.3  Untitled photograph. © Tom Hatton. Calais.
Nature Notes:
# While there is symbolic romance in the freedom of the bird flying, migration is a brutal exercise in endurance and survival.

# Migration flights, often across thousands of kilometres, require a huge amount of metabolic preparation. During flight one may lose half one’s body weight. Many die on the way.

# One of the most astonishing aspects of bird migration is the mechanisms they have evolved to be able to navigate vast distances. A quantum biological phenomenon in their eyes permits them to see the Earth’s magnetic rays. They navigate by the stars, by land and sea features, and by an internal compass. Genetically, within some species journeys are also able to be encoded. Chicks are known to hatch and then fly thousands of kilometres without prior guidance.

# Birds are the only known species on Earth to be able to migrate like this.

Viewing spot # 2. Beach & reeds.

Figure 15.4 Untitled photograph. © Tom Hatton. Calais.
As we emerge from the viewing hide, we’d like to draw your attention to the magnificent reedbed on your left, a popular habitat for the highly endangered Pied Avocet, which can be spotted here below.

Species: Pied Avocet (*Recurvirostra avosetta*).

A large black and white wader, renowned for its elegance, and included in Linnaeus’ 1758 *Systema Naturae*. Its large legs are particularly useful in scaling large obstacles, such as fences.

Conservation Status: Endangered in Europe due to loss of habitat. Not globally threatened, and widespread in most parts of Africa.

Song: The Pied Avocet utters a clear ‘kluit’. This is loud and often repeated. When alarmed, the same call appears as a somewhat more shrill ‘kloo-eet’.

Migration: Some populations live all year round in Africa; others breed in Europe and winter in Africa. Others migrate between central Asia, China and India.

*Nature Notes:*
# Zoologically speaking, migration is understood as a return journey to and from a place.
# Birds, like humans, are one of the few vocal learners in nature. MIT researchers have recently suggested that human language first evolved from the imitation of bird song. The expression of song is a costly metabolic exercise for birds, so it is understandable that they do not sing in flight. Song is used to communicate information about territory, and attract a mate, in specific habitations. The relationship between migration and song is far more prominent in humans, for its mnemonic function – especially in the example of Aboriginal people, where songs themselves are maps of the landscape.
# It is ironic that our rapidly advancing understanding of migration patterns in birds is for a large part due to the growth and popular use of innovative surveillance technology; technology that in other contexts is used to detain humans. Chips, tags, nature cams, body cameras, and GPS devices have assisted in the recent widespread mapping of bird migration routes, and an appreciation of just how astonishing the feat of bird migration is.
This is a real gem for visitors. Installed by VR artists from Norway, it’s our *I’m a Bird Get Me Out of Here* simulator.

In the 1930s ornithologist Ronald Lockley conducted some of the first migration experiments on birds, with a Manx Shearwater. Taking them from Skokholm Island, Wales, he journeyed to Boston by plane with the bird in a black box, so as to ensure it had no idea where it was. Immediately upon being released it flew East along a 3,200 mile route it had never flown. Twelve days, twelve hours and thirty-one minutes later, Lockley found the bird nestled back on Skokholm.

This twenty-minute installation offers visitors an outstanding, sensory interpretation of travelling thousands of miles in a box to somewhere unknown.

Following World War II, German ornithologists coined the term *Zugunruhe* to denote a kind of restlessness in migratory species when contained. (*Zug* meaning ‘move’, *unruhe* meaning ‘anxiety or ‘restlessness’).

Upon emerging, we invite you to listen closely to your body.
This part of the walk takes visitors from the dunes, further inland, into a section that we call The Open.

Figure 15.6  Untitled photograph. © Tom Hatton. Calais.

Species: Human (*Homo sapiens*).
Conservation Status:
Song:
Migration:

*Nature notes:*
# Widespread migration movements of today, in the wider context of the sixth great Age of Extinction in the Earth’s history, bring the human relationship to place under greater scrutiny.

# The Anthropocene is witnessing a deepening rupture between humans and evolved nature. This guidebook argues that the present mass movement of refugees and migrants, from the Middle East and Africa, is inseparable from the same destructive political and economic logic that
is driving severe climatic change. The effects of human-induced climate change, currently already in progress, will far outstrip present levels of deprivation and suffering.

# A comparison of animal and human migration, in the present global context, should not be read as degradingly viewing refugees as animals. The aim of this guidebook is to encourage new vantages of the present ‘refugee crisis’ from a natural historical point of view, as opposed to the dehumanizing economic and political arguments of much refugee discourse in the media.

# Could life on Earth have evolved to its present state without migration? We are dealing with an activity that is central to the evolutionary development of organic life, the movement of organisms and resources across the Earth.

# As the effects of climate change develop, the number of environmental refugees will far outstrip those displaced by war (not that war and ‘environmental’ reasons are ever separate).

# It appears that, in global governance, there needs to be a monumental rethink of how displaced persons can continue to live in some

Figure 15.7 Untitled photograph. © Tom Hatton. Calais.
form of dignity and prosperity. It is quite possible that, by the end of this century, displaced persons will be the norm.

# For the majority of the existence of *Homo sapiens*, we have not lived in one fixed place, or the notion of home has been fluid. We were nomads long before we were agrarians.

# Why, then, have humans not evolved comparable migratory skills to birds? We cannot see the Earth’s magnetic field, and our toddlers cannot migrate to Africa without our guidance. Nonetheless, where biology has not equipped us, technologically we are arguably the most advanced navigators on Earth. Researchers have conjectured that we are not, without technology, poor navigators. Modern humans have simply lost what biological, social migratory skills we had as a species. Remains of navigational skills within indigenous cultures – for instance, the well-documented ‘songlines’ of the Australian Aboriginal peoples – would seem to confirm this.

# It is not so much about how and why humans move. Humans will always move. It’s about how they are hosted when they arrive. This critical interaction requires deep care and attention.

# What we can say is that the journey changes the story.
# 6: Visitor Centre: *The Empty Space*.

We have been unconventional in the design of our Visitor Centre. Leaning upstream against the current tide of family-orientated gizmos, our Visitor Centre contains an empty space.

Species: Theatre (*Communitas*).
Conservation Status: Near Extinct.
Nature notes (in fifteen small thoughts):

1. The mass global migration movements of today have called into question many things: international governance regarding refugees, cross-border agreements such as Schengen, and the present capacity of international communities to deal with the growing numbers of displaced people.

2. It also calls into question the role of space, and how we share it.

3. Theatre is an art form of space and people.

4. An empty space is an empty space. If someone crosses an empty space, it can become theatre.

5. If people spend time in a space, a dynamic between the space and the people will emerge. A new narrative becomes possible.

6. Theatre is an art of being. Not doing.

7. There are not many spaces left where you can simply be, with others. And let being happen. Being is not a static state. It is an opening flower.

8. If the flower opens, revolutions are possible.

9. In simply being, we can listen to ourselves, and listen to others.

10. Theatre in these times becomes a place of refuge.
11. The place of refuge is always open, and always safe, for the cultivation of love and understanding.

12. A condition of the place of refuge is also that it is temporary. It is never one fixed place. It is a place to which one must travel and one must leave. It is the space to speak of that journey. The journey is the story and the story is the journey.

13. The place of refuge is not solely for humans. If it were, the mistakes of the past would continue.

14. We are the first humans to live in a time when natural spaces – the spatial dynamics evolved by nature without human intervention – are no longer a given. All theatre hitherto has been predicated on human action within non-human nature.

15. Human intervention in nature (synthetic biology and climate change) has meant that nature is changing. Quite possibly to a magnitude that we cannot conceive of. The theatre of refuge witnesses this human experience, as we move into an unknown world.

# 7: Gift Shop.

We hope you enjoyed your visit.

Figure 15.11  Untitled photograph. © Tom Hatton. Calais.

After The Jungle. April 2016.
Notes

1. On conditions in the camp, also see Crafter and Rosen (this volume).
2. On the diverse impacts of displacement and inhumane reception conditions, see Krause and Sharples (on children and adolescents affected by conflict and displacement) and Chatterjee et al., both in this volume.
3. On the role and experiences of a humanitarian volunteer worker in the camp, see Crafter and Rosen in this volume.