Such Stuff podcast
Episode 2: Refugee Week

[Music plays]

Imogen Greenberg: Hello and welcome to another episode of Such Stuff, the podcast from Shakespeare's Globe. This week, we'll be reflecting on our experiences of Refugee Week.
Back in June, the Globe was part of Refugee Week which takes place every year across the world. Here in the UK, it's a programme of arts, cultural and educational events that celebrate the contribution of refugees in the UK, and encourages better understanding of why people seek sanctuary, and better understanding between communities.

We were so thrilled to be part of Refugee Week, and wanted to bring you a few snippets of the extraordinary events that we hosted on site that week. Here's Michelle [Terry] on why we wanted to be part of Refugee Week.

Michelle Terry: So again, I keep talking about our cause: we talk about Shakespeare's transformative impact on the world. And then there's that extraordinary Thomas More speech which for me...it's "The Strangers' Case", what he was talking about then is exactly what we are talking about now. So it felt like we had a responsibility to respond not only to the provocation of that speech, but also the provocation of our times. And it just seemed like the perfect opportunity to do that in a curated week when nationally and internationally, people are having a similar conversation.

IG: Stick with us to go behind the scenes on Refugee Week at the Globe, and to hear Shakespeare's own humanist cry for compassion from some familiar voices.

[Music plays]

IG: First up, as part of Refugee Week Jude Christian performed *Nanjing*, a monologue she wrote about identity,

dispossession and the consequences of war, a story that is simultaneously delicate and epic. We sat down with Jude and Elayce Ismail who directed the production. Here, they talk about why Jude calls this piece a theatre essay, how individuals and how theatre can respond to global issues, and ask huge questions about pacifism and global responsibility. Here's Jude.

Jude Christian: I have been describing it to people as a theatre essay. It's not a play in the sense of a story with characters; it's me standing there saying lots of things that I think about the world, and asking people whether they think the same.

Primarily its starting point is the Rape of Nanking, which was a particularly notorious massacre that took place during World War II, when the Japanese army invaded China. And I was living in Germany about seven years ago when I was in my mid-twenties, and started reading about it on one of those kind of Wikipedia, Google, BBC News type binges, when you just fall down a hole of clicking through things. And found myself suddenly reading about monumental events that had happened on the other side of the world during World War II. I had this really strange experience of living as a British Chinese person who had grown up in England, I had been spending a year living in Germany which is where I was when I was reading about all of this. And so I had this weird sensation of living in Berlin, being surrounded by memorials to horrific things that had happened in Western Europe during World War II, and reading about the deaths of hundreds of thousands and millions of people on the other side of the world at the same time and just going, "I didn't know about this and I didn't learn about this and that feels very strange".

Elayce Ismail: And I think also importantly, one of the big questions that frames the piece is about pacifism. So with all of the interrogation of what happened in World War II in *Nanjing* and also the contemporary framework of Jude's life here as someone who has family from different places around the world, it talks about what it is to resist and what it is to resist peacefully or violently. And really asks the audience to think about in the context of their own life and

in the context of what we see in the news unfolding around the world, how we react to it, how we respond to it.

JC: Yes. I think I one of the places that the play came from originally was that while I was doing all of this research, while I was reading about the horror of a war that we know shaped the lives of a lot of people on the planet, there was a war unfolding in Syria. So at the time when I was beginning to research the Rape of Nanking was the moment at which the Arab Spring was becoming the Syrian Civil War, and suddenly the news was full of stories of people being massacred by their own government.

And you really felt this sense of paralysis, I think. I definitely felt in my own networks and my own community and in this country, people not understanding what it was that we should be doing. And it really made me personally interrogate my notions of pacifism and my sense of the responsibilities that we have to intervene in other places. And I guess, I as somebody who would always have described themselves as a pacifist and just gone, "Yes, it's really straightforward. You should just never hurt anyone ever." To be looking suddenly at both of these two events (the war in Syria and the Rape of Nanking) and going…when there is a massacre taking place, when there is a party that wants to kill a lot of people, it's not as simple as just going, "Well my personal creed is no-one should kill anyone". Because when you're up against a force that does want a lot of people to be horrifically killed, you as an individual by choosing purely to say, "I think that non-violence solves everything", in that very immediate situation you're absolving yourself of any responsibility to deal with what's happening.

I found it incredibly challenging and I think I wanted to write about just pushing to extremes what the responsibility of calling yourself a pacifist is. I wanted to test out if you believe non-violence is the way, what you are willing to go through, what you are willing to allow to happen to yourself and to other people (people you know or people you don't), and still call yourself a pacifist. Yes, I wanted to look at what the cost of that would be, not to undermine the idea of pacifism and to say that everyone should just turn their backs and

start bombing other countries. But I think because I had grown up in this incredibly privileged position where I lived in a country where I hadn't experienced any kind of warfare on a regular basis, where I wasn't in particular danger of encountering violence or oppression on a daily basis, and I had never really had to make a decision about violent or non-violent resistance in any context other than a speculative one, I think that when you're talking about big world politics and when you want to give people lots of information and try and challenge them to order or re-order their own thinking, I think you have a responsibility to not try and deceive people by sounding universal or detected or objective in that. I think it's really important to put yourself in that as a character, the sort of imperative reason being that you're owning the fact that you have a biased view point and you have a particular angle and that you have cherry-picked this information in relation to yourself. But also because I think that it allows people to connect on a very human level. I can talk about my very human, vulnerable, biased, fallible responses to people in history that I read about and events in history that I read about. And hopefully also, it allows people a way into the story because I'm standing there as a person, sort of freely offering up things about my own life.

EI: I definitely agree with that. I think that there is a version of this where it remains on the page as an essay, and it wouldn't provoke the same response in an audience. And I think the way that we've staged this piece and also doing it here in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, there's such a brilliant, beautiful contact between Jude on stage and then the audience that are sort of nestled around her. It's a conversation. It does feel like it opens up space within the themes, some of which are really weighty and epic and difficult. And within that you find space for your own thoughts, space to digest Jude's sort of very personal take on these themes and...I was thinking about this actually this morning, why do we make theatre? And for me, it has to be about something that when you leave the space, it's still percolating in your brain and it still exists and it still provokes you and it still makes you think. And the type of work both Jude and I make, I think we both strive for that. And we want the themes that we explore which are usually (because we both make

quite a lot of contemporary pieces) quite close to our own experience in life, we want them to be something that is sort of evolving and provocative and interrogative and that people can really have a response to.

JC: I think in a sense, one of the things that we're trying to do in *Nanjing* is to explore and highlight and condemn or mourn terrible things that have come about as a result of human attitudes towards other humans. But also to celebrate and really grasp and really cling to the good things and the kind things and the moments where people have put themselves on the line and have compromised...

EI: Yes.

JC: And gotten their hands dirty but really, really fought for what they believe to be right.

And what I find really inspiring about Refugee Week is that there are times where the world at the moment feels probably the darkest that it might have felt in our lifetimes. It feels like there are so many things going on globally, there are so many countries where you're seeing what seems to be an insurmountable public opinion towards things that I personally find really terrifying and upsetting and harmful. But I think in balance with that, you are therefore seeing communities and individuals all over the world be so vocal and so committed to fighting for good things that they believe in.

And I think in Refugee Week, what you have is that incredible juxtaposition of people ardently highlighting horrific things that need to be dealt with, and at the same time giving examples, giving practical examples and giving commitments to fighting that kind of suffering and that kind of horror and that kind of confrontation. You find people in incredible, small, every day, practical ways talking about ways that we can give love and support to one another. And also talking in terms of big picture, I think this is a moment in history that feels like a real rallying point. And there are times when you go, "This is a moment in history where the problems seem insurmountable", but even with that, you're connected with a

community around the world who are going, "We know that we all need to do better".

EI: Yes.

JC: I hope.

[Music plays]

IG: Refugee Week is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, and one of the things it does so brilliantly is to break down our assumptions and associations with the word ‘refugee’. This is precisely what Syrian Canadian visual artist and educator Dima Karout had in mind when she created Boarding Pass with the Globe team.

A participatory installation, it reflects on our experiences as humans in dealing with visible and invisible boundaries and invited people to reflect on our relationships with others. Dima created a border in the Globe foyer, inviting people to take a handmade boarding pass (created by members of the Globe team) and to write a response to a series of questions she had placed along the wall. She asked, "What would you give up? Who would you let go? Why do you care? Where do we draw the line? How did you get there? And when do you give a second chance?"

Here, Dima reflects on the border installation and how the questions encourage people to think about their own lives (as well as others) a little differently. She also shared some of the responses left on the border, by our wonderful Globe audiences.

Dima Karout: Well I could say this installation idea came from the will to introduce an interactive art work in the space, where people can also participate. So we invite them to add their voices to what we are creating, but also we wanted to reflect on the borders and the checkpoint and the walls that we are creating around the world, by introducing these metallic, wired barriers that I made by hand. And I found it very hard to create like emotionally but also

physically, to decide to go there where it doesn't belong and put it there and force it into a space at the Globe.

I placed questions because I wanted people to just think, to take a moment to think. And I didn't want to introduce the word ‘refugee’, I was so getting enough from hearing the word ‘refugee’, I wanted to ask them what do they think about their own personal life and how do they react and about their own relationships with others. Because we always ask about refugees and they don't know who they are and what is happening to them in a way. It's not concrete; it's just something that they hear about. But the questions I ask could talk to anyone, I wanted to ask just a normal human being who is passing by the Globe, "Why do you care?"

And when I wrote the questions, I started to think about them more. Like, what about me if I'm now standing and the installation is there and this border is in the space and have these questions. I started to write my answers to them in a different way. Because when I'm standing and the border is in my face, not to mention that I already crossed so many borders in my personal life, and when people say ‘passports’ and ‘visa’, I know what they are talking about. This is why when we started also the project, I wanted it to be a collective experience. So we created the workshop with all the Globe employees who really wanted to participate. So we did handmade boarding passes, we placed these boarding passes next to the installation (the wired border that had the questions), and visitors to the Globe can pick one and add their reflection or something they want to say and it to the installation.

So the installation evolved during the week and started empty and ended up filled with visions with participation, opinions, answers. Anything that the people who stood there wanted to say, they put it on this border. And maybe we can read some of these participations that answered the question.

I love this one, because this was my main question for the installation and it says, "Where do you draw the line?" And this one says, "I didn't draw it, but it cuts straight through my home". And I

found this very powerful, the line imposed on us that we didn't want to have.

"When do you give a second chance?" "When they messed up the first one!"

This one says, "Nobody is illegal on stolen land". "Borders are human made and, therefore, are likely wrong most of the time. But we're too embarrassed to let on, so let's not".

This one answers many questions on the same card, on the same boarding pass: "You always give a second chance. You never give up on anyone. The lines are imaginary. We care because there is nothing else." And I think on the back, it's about giving a second chance and it’s that person who wants, "I care because I am human and second chances are human". I like the idea that because we all make mistakes, because we are human and we do need a second chance now.

"I would give up everything to keep my child safe. I'm not sure I could let him go, but that is because I have never had to consider it. We all deserve to feel safe, we all deserve protection. We are all valid, no child is born to hate. I would erase the line." I like this one, when you ask somebody where you draw the line and he wants to erase the line.

I want to read this one because it's made by Dima! For some reason, somebody picked a boarding pass that I made during the workshop and I love what this person said. “Every time I land at Heathrow or Gatwick or Stansted, border control ask me where I work, why I'm here, what I do. Every time I leave the country, I worry about being let back in (even with all my papers). Every time I come back to the country, I think about what I've left behind. Every time my visa to enter and remain in the UK was rejected, I felt like a criminal. Every time I'm asked where I am from, I don't know what to say. Every time I get in the longer queue at immigration that takes one hour, I remember I'm not from here. Every time I look at my passport, I wonder how a little, empty book of stamps has such a

huge impact on my life. Overtime any of these things happen, I remember I am lucky." I love this one, it's really powerful.

IG: That was Dima Karout, with some of the powerful responses to her boarding pass installation from our Globe audiences.

[Music plays]

IG: So you've heard from Jude, Elayce and Dima on how they've used very different art forms to interrogate our relationship with others, to ask some of the most difficult questions that face us, and to encourage audiences to join in those dialogues. Artists have always responded to the world around us and Shakespeare was no exception.

In *Sir Thomas More*, Shakespeare and a team of other playwrights depicted the rise and fall of More's career, which included the May Day Riots of 1517. In this play, Thomas More memorably confronts the rioters, condemning their "mountainsh inhumanity", and urging them to consider "the Strangers' Case", the plight of London's refugees. It's a rallying cry for compassion and empathy that echoes from his century to ours, and is sadly still so relevant.

We worked with the International Refugee Committee to bring together a group of refugees from Syria, Sierra Leone and South Sudan, alongside actors to read "The Strangers' Case", an expression of unity with all those who have fled conflict overseas.

[Music plays]

"Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,
Their babies at their backs and their poor luggage,
Plodding to the ports and coasts for transportation,
And that you sit as kings in your desires,
Authority quite silent by your brawl,
And you in ruff of your opinions clothed;
What had you got? I'll tell you. You had taught
How insolence and strong hand should prevail,

How order should be quelled; and by this pattern
Not one of you should live an aged man,
For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought,
With self same hand, self reasons, and self right,
Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes
Would feed on one another.
Say now the king should so much come to short of your great trespass
As but to banish you, whither would you go?
What country, by the nature of your error,
Should give you harbour?
Go you to France or Flanders,
To any German province, to Spain or Portugal,
Nay, any where that not adheres to England,—
Why, you must needs be strangers. Would you be pleased
To find a nation of such barbarous temper,
That, breaking out in hideous violence,
Would not afford you an abode on earth,
Whet their detested knives against your throats,
Spurn you like dogs, and like as if that God
Owed not nor made not you, nor that the elements
Were not all appropriate to your comforts,
But chartered unto them, what would you think
To be thus used? This is the strangers' case;
And this your mountanish inhumanity."

IG: So that's it from this year's Refugee Week, but look out for Refugee Week next year at Shakespeare's Globe. You can find out more about the organisation and their week at refugeeweek.org.uk.

Our theme music is from the album *Mali in Oak*, which was recorded in our very own Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. To find out more about Shakespeare's Globe and what's on, follow us on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. We'll be back with more stories from Shakespeares Globe, so subscribe wherever you got this podcast from.