

PLAYING THE REFUGEE GAME WITH SANDGLASS THEATER

by Andrew Periale



ENSEMBLE MEMBER KEILA K. CHING

In the winter 2018 issue of *The Puppetry Journal* (vol. 69, no. 1), I wrote a review of Sandglass Theater's *Babylon* (page 22, "Babylon"), an exploration of the plight of refugees, and the challenges they face when attempting to settle in the United States. Though the performance I saw was presented as a "work in progress," it was already an extremely compelling production, created in ensemble and based on many conversations with new US residents (facilitated by the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program, or VRRP). My assessment at the time was that this was a show that needed to be seen by everyone, as it raised awareness of a massive challenge to countries all over the world. Since its premier, it has developed into a more encompassing program in which there is no longer merely an audience – everyone participates. When we talk about refugees, we need to realize that we are not discussing a "them," we are talking about OUR neighbors, OUR family.

There are a number of things that might cause people to leave their homes: War and political instability, ethnic cleansing, extreme poverty, ecological disaster – but the effects are the same: misery, poverty, exploitation, prolonged homelessness and fences. Especially fences, whether of the physical or political sort, erected to let the displaced know without a doubt: WE are in, and YOU are out. There isn't space here to get into every aspect of the problem of displaced populations worldwide, so let's just look at the people represented in *Babylon*. There are seven refugees, five of whom are from Syria, Afghanistan, El Salvador and Burundi. None of these accounts were biographical; They were composites arrived at through many meetings with resettled refugees who, over time, came to know and trust the artists and gradually shared their stories. Nonetheless, the characters represented a range of people facing a range of challenges. We recognize the causes, and the painful effects, as these stories have a very "ripped from the headlines" feel to them. Another topic that has been very current in contemporary art making is this: Is this my story to tell? Whatever one may think of "cultural appropriation," it is a question we need to ask ourselves, and Sandglass certainly did. Director Eric Bass says: "If we invest in the arms that have impacted the conflicts that have caused displacement, racism, Islamophobia, antisemitism, then, yes, to that extent it is our story, too."

PUPPETRY INTERNATIONAL

Sandglass, which was founded by Bass and Ines Zeller in Germany, has now been in Vermont for over thirty years and their productions have often dealt with the subjects of antisemitism, community and inclusivity. For this production they formed a new ensemble, intentionally diverse. The cast members themselves have had the experience of hitting those fences that separate the insiders from “others.” Because all the cast members were involved in creating the play, the resulting work necessarily reflects their own challenges and priorities, a fact that certainly added to the production’s power. They sang as an ensemble, the puppets were manipulated on tabletops or in relation to several units of fencing with the puppeteer/actors in plain sight.

A great deal has changed in the year or so since opening night. “The fences are gone,” said Eric in a recent conversation I had with him and Shoshana (Babylon cast member and daughter of Eric and Ines). There is now a lot more consciousness of the puppets *as* puppets, and less focus on the personalities they represent. This was a result of things they learned from performing the piece. They began asking: “Where did the refugees come from, and what did they leave behind that they wouldn’t have left if they hadn’t been forced out? The Afghan woman, for instance, takes a fifty-pound bag of flour with her – she is the nurturer, she feeds people. One thing that they noticed was that, if the texts are spoken by refugees, then the argument against refugees instantly becomes cynical. I took this to mean that for the audience to be placed in this position could be seen as adversarial and therefore alienating. To be inclusive – to bring audience members in despite their diverse opinions on the matter – arguments were always spoken by someone other than the puppet. The focus of the action is always the puppets, who do not speak. Only at the very end

does the puppet representing the Syrian man speak. He speaks in English, and we learn, among other things, that he has a master’s degree. It challenges our preconceptions and, coming at the end of the play, makes us re-examine everything we have seen up to that point.

The major change, though, is that Sandglass no longer envisions booking this as a performance, but as a portion of a week-long residency. One of the main activities in the residency is “The Game of Refugee Resettlement.” This is a board game, developed at first by VRRP’s Laurie Stavrand. She hadn’t quite finished it, so Sandglass Theater member Jana Zeller redesigned it. Cast members were trained as facilitators and further refined it. There was a prolonged back-and-forth between members of Sandglass Theater and the VRRP to develop the ideas. It works like this: the game lasts 45 minutes. There are five games going at once, and at each table there are four players and a facilitator. Participants become refugees trying to get asylum and be resettled. Cast members have said that it is more intense to play the game than it is to do the performance, because in the game only one person gets on the airplane at the

end, and sometimes not even that. The game is followed by a “talk back” – there are no observers, everyone participates; It helps people get more deeply into the show and allows the performance to resonate more deeply and for a longer period of time.

“The process of devising Babylon,” said Eric, “was a process of becoming comfortable talking about race – all of us, not just the white people in the cast – and how to not tokenize (none of us speaks for ‘our people’).” It’s been a great training ground for the cast. They also went through a process called Conflict Transformation training.

The ultimate question of Babylon is: What if it were me? Telling these stories forces us to engage and see the refugees as individuals. Because the actors remain witnesses, the puppets become empty vessels that audience members can fill with their own “what if it were me.” The show, the game: this is the sort of social engagement that no longer has me simply saying, “See this show,” but, “Come to the table.”

See a video of selected scenes at
sandglasstheater.org/babylon

