



THE SYRIAN MONOLOGUES

An artistic solidarity action call

Why

The war in Syria has been taking place since five years. Civilians are the immediate target of the various fighting sides. Mass destruction and continuous atrocities have been committed. People are fleeing from one death to another: from death under fire to death under water. The risks on the journey to the border often are as high as the risks when staying: Families walk for miles through the night to avoid being shot by snipers or getting caught by soldiers who regularly kidnap young men to fight for the regime.

Hundreds of thousands of refugees also attempt the dangerous trip across the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey to Greece or from the coasts of North Africa to Italy hoping to find a better future in Europe. Not all of them survive this nightmare like trip, which is said to be the deadliest route for refugees and migrants. Those who do arrive by sea to Greece or Italy still have to face enormous challenges: Resources are strained by the massive influx and hence, provided services are minimal. In October 2015, the total number of refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean in 2015 reached to nearly 530,000, according to the UN Refugee Agency. All refugees are fleeing to safer and more stable places in order to make a better living for themselves and their children. On their way, they are facing horrors from smugglers, weather circumstances, and arbitrary political decisions of the countries they arrive in or pass through.

According to Amnesty International, more than 4 million refugees from Syria are in the five immediately neighbouring countries only:

- Lebanon hosts approximately 1.2 million refugees from Syria which amounts to around one in five people in the country,
- Jordan hosts about 650,000 refugees from Syria, which amounts to about 10% of the population,
- Turkey hosts 1.9 million refugees from Syria, more than any other country worldwide,
- Iraq hosts 249,463 refugees from Syria, and

- Egypt hosts 132,375 refugees from Syria.

In Europe, the numbers of the refugees from Syria are increasing on a daily basis:

- Germany 90,000
- Sweden over 64,700
- Austria 18,000
- Greece 88,204
- Russia 5,000
- France 6,700
- Denmark 11,300
- Hungary 18,800
- Spain 5,500
- Netherland 14,100
- Austria 18,600
- Bulgaria 15,000

Yet, the figures above completely mask individual fates: Who are these people who fled? Why did they flee and how? What did they experience while being on the run? What are they confronted with in the hosting country? What do they aspire? All these questions and more will be the themes of work in order to help them re-adjust after the traumatic experiences they had to face both on their soil and in the chronicles of their fleeing.

ASHTAR Theatre launches this call based on its distinguished experience with 'The Gaza Monologues' project in 2010. In this project, youth from Gaza have written testimonies about their experiences of the Israeli aggression on Gaza and the siege. 'The Gaza Monologues' were translated into 18 languages and afterwards distributed to over 36 countries. More than 1,700 young people performed them, which drew great awareness to what has been happening to the people in the Gaza Strip and attempted to break the misleading status of individuals who turned into a bare numerical figure of casualties. 'The Gaza Monologues' project was also an important tool for young Gazans to cope with traumas they have been dealing with since the Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip.

In 2014, ASHTAR Theatre was invited by CARE Jordan to initiate a project with Syrian refugees in Amman. In this initiative, ASHTAR worked with 120 refugees from different ages. 22 of them wrote their own personal monologues. Some of these monologues were presented in Amman on June 9th, 2015 at a special event organised by CARE Jordan for the World Refugee Day. In addition, a forum play about the refugees' lives in the city of Amman was presented with 12 of the initiative's participants on September 9th, 2015.

These experiences have driven ASHTAR Theatre to launch an artistic call in the hope that theatre makers from different host communities of Syrian refugees will join us in this project.

Objectives

- To generate human solidarity in the respective hosting communities towards Syrian refugees,
- To help refugees and hosting communities to deal with the new situation,
- To put theatre at the forefront fulfilling its role to serve people and to generate social and political change on the local and international level,
- To utilise theatre as a medium to help the refugees overcome their traumas,
- To reach out to politicians and decision makers with the human stories of refugees and urge them to accelerate a political solution for Syria, and
- To collect all monologues from each participating country and publish them in a book.

What

The project is an international solidarity call for artists living in countries where Syrian refugees are fleeing to. The project aims at raising the voices of Syrian refugees, at sharing their stories of agony and displacement, at sharing their dreams for safety and for return to their homes and at helping them to fulfil them.

We appeal to artists especially those working in theatre and for change in order to:

- Work with the refugees who arrive in their country,
- Make theatre workshops with different age groups,
- Encourage the refugees to tell their stories,
- Collect these stories and translate them into the language of the respective country,
- Form the collected stories into monologues that their authors could tell publicly in a form of a stage reading, a performance, a radio drama or a dramatic play,
- Perform these monologues collectively at the time internationally coordinated for the project,
- Train the participants to perform their stories and if they are not able, find actors for the performances, and
- Collect some of the monologues and their authors in order to participate in performances at the European Parliament in Brussels and the United Nations Office in Geneva.

When

The project will start as soon as the artists are able to reach out to refugees. ASHTAR suggests the beginning of January 2016 as a starting point. The realisation of the work with refugees is expected to take 6 months in each country.

On the World Refugee Day, **June 20, 2016**, we will all simultaneously perform the monologues gathered with the refugees in each country. Artists could then continue to perform after that set date according to their own time table. On **December 20, 2016**, the International Solidarity Day, we will target the UN office in Geneva to perform chosen monologues from various countries.

How

Artists will be independent in their work but yet connected through the themes and objectives of the project.

Each artist in each participating country should try to support him/her regarding the workshops, the local performances, and the translation of the monologues into the country's language.

ASHTAR Theatre will be responsible of the UN and the EU performances in collaboration with all the artists involved.

ASHTAR will also be responsible of the final book or volume in various languages and its distribution.

Samples of the Monologues

Bashar Asfar (17 years old) – from Daraa

This is the war – it came to Syria not knowing who the people were.

The rebels asked everyone to leave their houses because they want to liberate the area; so everyone started to run out of their homes. My mother told us in fear: 'We will be leaving the country to Jordan.'

My siblings and I started to prepare our bags and gathered all our things that we like. We liked all our belongings but we could not take them all, because we could only take a few essential things. That night, time passed very quickly and the sun rose before its due time to tell us: 'It's time to leave.' The moment I never wished to happen had arrived: I was forced to leave my country. So I kept telling myself despite the sorrow that strangled my soul that I would be back, I would be back.

I was living in Daraa, a city few hundred meters away from Ramtha. Every Friday after the prayer, we would go to the market to buy Humus and bread. We would find half of the market shoppers coming from Ramtha in Jordan as neighbouring cities would naturally do. So we fled to Jordan.

We arrived at the Jordanian borders. Despite the good reception of our fellow brothers in Jordan, I started to sense that we became refugees. This made me very angry. We were registered - my mother and my siblings - into a food program which turned us into numbers; numbers for eating, numbers for moving, numbers for health care. But I am a number that dreams to go back to my humanity, to go back to my country. I dream of a future that would free me from this trap. I dream of an education that would help me to overcome this hardship.

Dear Jordan, I respect all those who helped us and hosted us in their homes and hearts. I will never forget the owner of our first rented house in Amman, how his eyes would go in tears when we used to offer him money to pay our rent, how he would say: 'keep it until your financial situation gets better'. I also like those who listen to our stories and agonies, and hate who was the reason behind all this misery.

P.S. I also dislike the gas man in the morning when he wakes me up playing his ugly music, as if the houses were empty.

Amal Ibrahim (53 years old) – from Edleb

I wish the old days would return, but not the bad ones. My husband died when I was still young and I had to continue the harsh and difficult path of raising my children alone for more than 22 years. Then the war came and destroyed everything in the blink of an eye: the house I built and the education of my children, which was the priority of my life. The outbreak of the war did not allow them to finish their education and obtain their certificates, since we had to leave the country before their graduation, which ceased their opportunities in working and destroyed my dreams and overwhelmed me.

When the revolution erupted; it was peaceful in the beginning. Demonstrators were only calling God's name: 'Allah Wa Akbar'. During one of these demonstrations, I was attending a wedding at my neighbour's house. The calling started to rise and the sounds of the bullets started to fill the space. It felt like rain pouring down from the sky. I looked out of the window and saw soldiers rushing into my house in pursuit of a young boy. I was not able to reach my house due to the intensity of the shouting, and my daughter was at home alone. She was very afraid – when the soldiers came into the house, she started to scream: 'This boy is not my brother, he is not my brother.' Yet the boy was insisting that she was. The soldiers took the boy and left her in panic.

We escaped to my sister's house, because it was safer there. But the revolution rapidly turned into war. One day while I was with my sister shopping in the market, the tanks entered the neighbourhood where she lives and besieged it. We were stuck outside unable to go back home. We bought bread and food and waited to see what we could do and when the shooting would stop. The bombing was both from the ground and the sky, from tanks and planes; so we took a corner and stayed there waiting. I called my nephew but I wasn't able to hear anything except the shouting and the crying around him. He said: 'Don't try to come back. The shelling is intense here, and our neighbour's house had been destroyed.' My sister and I started to cry and pray.

Sometime later, a car passed by and we asked the driver to take us home. The driver said: 'This is like going into death on your own feet. If you want I could drop you at a nearer neighbourhood.' We started debating, my sister and me, who would go in the car and who would stay. We finally decided to go together and if fate desired die together. We jumped into the car and went to the neighbouring road. The car was shaking left and right from the loud noises of the bombs. When we left the car, we started to walk across the walls to protect ourselves. We were crying, laughing and calling God to guide our way to reach our children safe.

When we arrived home, we started to laugh hysterically, especially when our children were laughing and crying at our funny sight jumping from one corner to another to stay safe. My youngest nephew was crying loudly because we did not take him with us to the market as he wanted to go out to see the planes bombing.

The shelling continued and with every hit, my sister would hide behind the door. Cynically, we would ask her: 'Do you think the door would protect you when the whole building collapses?' Her daughter would shout 'take the ground' and we all submit. Each would hide under something: a chair, a table or a bed. When the bombs stopped we laughed again at our actions and my niece started to play the role of the journalist, asking us questions and commenting on the situation: 'charming, despite the fear and pain, charming.'

I will never forget the horrible day my daughter and me decided to flee to another country in order to save the young children who have no stake in this war. That day, we started our journey after we agreed to pay money to the smuggler to take us to a safer country. The smuggler betrayed us, left us at Daraa after handing us over to another smuggler. We couldn't protest or argue, so we handed our fate to God. We went into another car, my daughter and I with her three children. The eldest of them was only four years old. We paid the agreed amount to the first taxi. For the second one, we paid an amount of twelve thousand liras to take us to Al Lama. We arrived there and the taxi driver said: 'There are cattle trucks commuting to the borders, but you have to pay six thousand liras. The truck will drive you only at night without lights because the soldiers on the way will be shooting.' We refused and started to walk.

The image that haunted me during this saga was the Palestinian diaspora series. I was holding a sack on my head and carrying a bag in my hand and one more with our food on my back. My daughter carried her little daughter and the little one's bag. Her husband carried his two daughters, each in one hand. At 2pm, the smuggler handed us over to two young men and informed us that we had to walk for another two hours to reach the next point. The whole day passed and the night started to fall, but we had not arrived yet. We were not able to rest. The kids were not allowed to cry or scream otherwise the troops who are 200 meters away from us, would shoot on us. On the way, I had to get rid of the food and other things too. We arrived at the destination set by the smugglers. Then, the smugglers started to quarrel violently among themselves. One of the two smugglers took us to the center where a car was supposed to drive us to the city of Suweidaa. We waited there for four hours - in pain and hunger – waiting for more people to come and fill the vehicle. Later, a woman from that city came and brought us food and water. The truck we had to take got filled with people who arrived. We had no choice then but to accept its bad conditions since the children were hungry and cold and the adults were very tired.

We started the journey at night and in the middle of the way, the truck broke down. What to do? What is the solution? It was so cold and we were very afraid that the soldiers would see us. The children and the women started to cry and to scream. My daughter was very angry. She blamed the smuggler, but he told her to shut up or otherwise he would shoot in the air. This would have drawn the attention of the soldiers who then would have killed all of us. She hugged her daughter and started to cry silently. We were obliged to continue our journey on foot until we arrived to the gardens of Suweidaa. There, a trailer came and took us to Al Suemreh, the point from where we would go to the Jordanian border. The citizens of Al Suemreh welcomed us and gave us food and water.

A big trolley came and took us all. We were packed in the trolley, and there was no space to put our legs straight. In this journey, the smugglers asked us to pay hundred thousand liras. We did not succeed in gathering the whole amount. The smugglers refused the money and said: 'Get all the money or go back home.' We helped each other and collected from those who had more to support those who had less. The trolley set on the streets that were very rough and dangerous. Every time the trolley tilted, we panicked

and prayed, cursing the reason behind our misery. After twelve hours of horror, we arrived at the Jordanian border and found other families waiting for their turn to enter Jordan. When their turn came, we took their food, water and space to be our temporary place.

The next day, Jordanian soldiers came and gave us food and water. It started to rain, so my son in law gathered some sticks and plastic bags to make a fire for us to get warm. On the third day, I got very sick and could not stay any longer with my daughter and her family. A car picked me up and crossed the border. When they brought me water and food to eat I refused because I remembered my granddaughter telling me: 'I'm hungry grandma, I'm hungry.' The Jordanian captain saw me crying. He took pity on my situation and went under the rain, in the horrible weather and brought my daughter and her family to me. I thanked him dearly and left to the Sarhan Square not knowing whether we will be accepted to enter the refugee camp or not.