

The Walk: A Participatory Performative Action Across the Borders of Europe

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Abstract The chapter analyses the artistic action *The Walk*, performed across 9 borders by an international network of artists and citizens in support of asylum seekers. At the core of the performance is a giant puppet representing a little girl who walks 8,000 km from the Syria-Turkey border to the United Kingdom. Through this participatory march, *The Walk* attempts an act of spatial and urban decolonisation, designing an alternative public space. This paper analyses the case study by applying a practice-led approach combining Performance Studies and Migration Studies, and focusing on three main issues: the performative praxes of spatial politics, the relational process of creation, and the theatrical languages for a counter-narrative about migration.

Keywords Theatre and refugees. Performance and spatial politics. Borders. Participatory art and public spaces.

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1 On Practising the Centrality of Borders

The Walk is a participatory artistic action performed across 8 countries over 4 months (July–November 2021) by an international network of artists, activists and citizens in support of young asylum seekers. At the core of this travelling performance is a giant puppet (3.5 metres tall) representing a young Syrian refugee called Amal, walking

over 8,000 km along one of the migration routes from the Syrian border to the United Kingdom across Turkey, Greece, Italy, France, Switzerland, Germany and Belgium. At each stop of her journey, Amal was welcomed by local artists and communities with street performances, concerts, shows, poetry actions. During the long parades, Amal was accompanied by supporters, children, activists, passers-by, immigrants, as well as by a virtual public following the live stream on social media. These diverse audiences weave a network of mutual references around the political body of Amal, which represents a major type of intersectional discrimination based on origin, gender, and age.

The project has been conceived by a group of artists who gravitate around Good Chance, a theatre founded in the migrant camp of Calais and trained in working with and for asylum seekers.¹ After numerous artistic experiences with migrants and non-citizens in transit in England and France, they brought together a group of artists, leading producers and collaborators, to carry out this ambitious international project. By applying a process of participatory and relational performance involving hundreds of citizens and cultural institutions across various countries, *The Walk* has realised a collective artwork that challenges the European borders and proposes a new transnational and post-colonial spatial thinking.

This travelling action is focused on the key question of borders which traverses a range of disciplines, including anthropological and sociological theories (Agier 2016; Brambilla et al. 2015; Mezzadra, Neilson 2013) and artistic and theatrical practices.

Since the experimentations of conceptual Border Art in Mexico,² which proposed a new paradigm for reimagining the study of art from its margins (Sheren 2015), borders have become a crucial site for political artistic research and practice.

In recent years, performative actions involving non-citizens in transit have been significantly increasing and stimulated critical interpretations and theoretical analyses (Balfour 2013; Jeffers 2012; Wilmer 2018). Performing in in-between spaces has become an aesthetic and programmatic synthesis in which the threshold is conceived as a space of enunciation and negotiation through interactions; a relational and dynamic site; a third space of presence (Bhabha 1994). Beyond any dualism, the notion of in-between space pushes to-

1 Good Chance was founded in 2015 by two playwrights, Joe Robertson and Joe Murphy, who established a temporary geodesic dome in the migrant camp of Calais. This space was intended to offer a free creative and imaginative zone for marginalised people in order to support their mental freedom and agency, through various activities ranging from improvisation, music, art, sport and cinema. <https://www.goodchance.org.uk/>.

2 Since its conception in the mid-1980s, at the US-Mexico border, Border Art has developed a range of practices and theoretical positions that address the issues of borders, surveillance, belonging and origin.

ward new structures of creation and new political initiatives toward an expansion of non-material spaces.³

Good Chance is one of the theatre groups which has cultivated this artistic path focused on spatial praxes, through a constant practice of the “centrality of the border” (Agier 2018). Since its first artistic action carried out in the “hypertrophic border” of Calais (Agier 2018),⁴ Good Chance has tried to shift public and media attention towards these invisible and liminal places -camps and reception centres-, neither inside nor outside European borders and traversed by a growing number of people from various origins (Ruffini 2019).⁵ The travelling performance *The Walk* is a development of this direction, amplifying the theatrical public space and reversing the role of the centre and the margins. In mapping the route of the performance, the artists and producers considered the symbolic importance of each stage. *The Walk* crosses the gateways of Europe and the heart of Fortress Europe, entering its institutions. Stops in refugee camps and meetings with urban migrant communities, alternate with passages through the mediagenic heart of Europe, across its core institutions in Strasbourg and Brussels, its historic capitals, its cultural and religious temples [fig. 1]. Just as building a theatrical dome in Calais meant declaring the gateways of Europe as *urbem*, so the appearance of Amal in the heart of the continent symbolises the epiphany of a new transnational citizen (Balibar 2003). From Calais to Rome, *The Walk* attempts a spatial and urban decolonisation of the European imaginary about migration.⁶

This chapter analyses the case study, by employing a practice-led approach combining Performance Studies and Migration Studies. Besides conducting a qualitative study through non-directive interviews with artists and collaborators, the research has applied participant observation and creative research methods during the the-

³ Since the 1990s, various artists have developed the concept of in-between space or interstitial spaces, under the impulse of the postcolonial notion of Third Space elaborated by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994).

⁴ In 2015, the “Jungle” of Calais was the largest unofficial migrant camp in Europe, in which up to 8,000 migrants were living.

⁵ Agier considers refugee camps and borderlands to be laboratories of an “ordinary cosmopolitanism”, composed of new subjects who are both included and excluded (Agier 2016). In addition to Good Chance, many theatre groups are experimenting with intercultural performing languages in migrant camps, on the Balkan routes, in the Greek camps and in reception centres in Italy, France and Germany, as well as in Palestinian diaspora camps. These artistic actions are also common in Africa, in particular in the Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian, Congolese, Kenyan and Malian camps.

⁶ The artistic practice of spatial decolonisation is particularly developed in South Africa, where performance and theoretical reflections are deeply linked to apartheid segregative urbanism. Cf. Boulle, Pather 2019 and Ruffini 2022.



Figure 1 Amal dancing in Saint Peter's square, Vatican City, September 2021. Photo by the Author

atrical journey across Europe and the United Kingdom.⁷ The analysis focuses on the following main points: the performative praxes on spatial politics; the relational process of public creation involving artists, refugees and citizens; the theatrical strategies adopted for a counter-narrative about migration.

2 “Let’s Have a Walk!”: A Relational Practice of Creation

The idea of a walking performance across borders came from a talk among collaborators of Good Chance, wondering how artists could support the cause of asylum seekers. David Lan, former artistic director of the Young Vic Theatre in London, proposed to create an act that reproduced the journey of many millions of people. “Gradually this idea grew out of hearing about refugee people walking” (Lan quoted in Hemming 2021). The founders of Good Chance, Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, added the idea of the giant puppet representing a young refugee, “too big to ignore”. The size of the project prompted them to involve skilled collaborators such as the renowned director and producer Stephen Daldry⁸ and the film producer Tracey Seaward.⁹ For the creation of the puppet, they turned to Adrian Kohler and Basil Jones, the founders of the South African company Handspring Puppet, who are considered among the leading masters of puppetry.¹⁰ Their contribution was crucial to the project, not only for their craft mastery but also for their artistic approach. Handspring Puppet Company has a long history of activism and artistic struggles in South Africa. Since the dark years of apartheid, they have used puppets as a tool for dealing with divisive political issues, managing to reach large audiences. By collaborating with William Kentridge, the company has created some of the most politically influential and significant works of post-colonial theatre.¹¹ For decades,

⁷ This paper is a partial outcome of the Marie Skłodowska-Curie project research entitled “Playing at the Gateways of Europe: theatrical languages and performative practices in Migrant Reception Centres of the Mediterranean Area”. This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 894921.

⁸ Stephen Daldry also directed *The Jungle* in 2017, a play about the Calais camp performed by the Good Chance Ensemble and co-produced by the National Theatre and Young Vic.

⁹ Tracey Seaward is widely known for the success of the London Olympics Opening Ceremony in 2012.

¹⁰ Handspring Puppet Company was founded in 1981 in Cape Town.

¹¹ Cf. the plays *Woyzeck on the Highveld* (1992), *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997), *Faustus in Africa!* (1995).

they have investigated, even theoretically,¹² the possibilities offered by puppets as a medium for overcoming the prejudices of the audience and stimulating their critical reflection. Their artistic experience is inseparable from their political and social practice aimed at articulating the unspeakable, knowing that “it is difficult to shut up a puppet”, as they say (Jones 2021). Kohler and Jones enthusiastically accepted to join the project *The Walk*, as an ideal conclusion of their career. Thus, their expertise in facing new social challenges through participatory art indelibly marked *The Walk* by directing its perspective and positionality.

Amal’s performance is also defined by the decisive role of the Palestinian artistic director Amir Nizar Zuabi who accompanied the whole journey, guiding live the dramaturgical action.¹³ Formerly a long-time associate of David Lan, Zuabi suggested leaving room for spontaneous, unpredictable audience interactions, trusting in improvisation. He also launches the idea of the “acts of welcome” created in public places by communities and artists, mostly with a migratory background. These acts are at the core of *The Walk* and constitute the structure around which urban parades are improvised.

For this reason, during the project preparation, it was decided to collaborate with six regional producers deeply connected to the territories crossed by the performance.¹⁴ Knowing the cultural environment, these producers were able to build a grassroots network, involving local artists and connecting them to design the final path. The network gradually expanded to include various intersectoral collaborations with refugee associations, NGOs, activists and schools.

Even before being a performance, *The Walk* is a relational practice of citizenship in support of asylum seekers. The entire project is grounded on relationships and proposes a methodology of creation, communication and realisation based on increasing dialogical exchanges. Hundreds of institutional and non-institutional partners formed the frame that supported and shaped this ambitious project in logistical, artistic and financial terms: municipalities, funders, charities, volunteers, theatres, museums. This network initiated a series of transversal collaborations between international partners, refugee and non-refugee communities who had never previously worked together. “A corridor of friends”, as defined by David Lan (Lan quoted in Hemming 2021), which represents one of the main legacies of the project.

¹² In collaboration with the University of Cape Town, UTC.

¹³ During the performances, Zuabi communicated through an audiophone with the puppeteer inside Amal, who had limited visibility.

¹⁴ Recep Tuna in Turkey, Yolanda Markopoulou in Greece, Roberto Roberto and Ludovica Tighi in Italy, Amaya Jeyarajah Dent in the United Kingdom, Claire Béjanin in France, Germany, Switzerland and Belgium.

With the aim of networking, the organisers set out a digital strategy to be delivered before, during and after the theatrical journey. A digital platform in six languages was created to connect participants and to provide an accessible online archive of the virtual acts of welcome, videos and performances created worldwide.¹⁵ The digital space has also offered the opportunity to work with people and artists who could not cross European borders, in particular Syrian artists, who play a crucial role in this project. Meanwhile, an education programme has been developed for schools, students and teachers, consisting of digital workshops and creative learning activities.

In order to reach different generational groups and geographical areas, the digital strategy applied multiple channels in addition to the domain .org, such as the social media channels Facebook, Twitter, Instagram (which is also used to stream online events) and some dedicated apps: an audio guide created by refugee artists, the interactive cartoon *Little Amal*, and the virtual 8,000 kilometres marathon *Run for Amal*.¹⁶

When the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic forced a complete rethink of the project, the digital strategy provided a major tool for the participants to meet online and work out solutions with all the partners. Many small local realities joined the project at this stage, while several national institutions remained suspended, locked up in the aphasia into which the COVID-19 had thrown a main part of the theatrical world. Despite the unfavourable conditions for a travelling international performance, the organising team decided to react at a time when borders were hardening even more.¹⁷ The logistics were a challenge in the context of continuously changing restrictions on public gatherings, border closures, quarantines, passes and documents. The design of the route across 9 borders included an assortment of alternative plans. Improvisation was applied as an implementation methodology allied to the strategic ability of the producers and artists. Most of the collaborators who revolved around the project had worked in migrant camps or reception centres and were well-trained in uncertainty and instability. Indeed, in camps the creative framework is shaped by the spatial and temporal liminal conditions: all the critical elements of theatrical practices (time, spaces and actors) are shifting. By creating and working in this transitional and ephemeral frame, these artists developed an approach rooted in improvisation and instant actions (Ruffini 2019). When they joined *The Walk* project, this helped them to

¹⁵ <https://www.walkwithamal.org/acts-of-welcome/>.

¹⁶ The digital space was also used to raise funds for the action and to support grassroots associations working with young refugees.

¹⁷ The risk was partly offset by other considerations: the long closure of theatres, the scarcity of new productions, the limited number of cultural events, gave to *The Walk* a wide international visibility.

manage the frequent schedule changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They conceived a performance juggling with impermanence and unpredictability, trying to transmute them into artistic resources. In *The Walk*, the chance is considered a poetic and creative element. And this is precisely one of the greatest artistic qualities of this ambitious undertaking that involves a huge number of civic and cultural partners in a complex concatenation of actions across 8 nations and over 65 cities.

3 **Amal: An Empty Machine for Silent Counter-Narratives about Migration**

Across the 8,000 km journey, the only fixed element of the travelling performance is the body of the puppet Amal. This giant puppet representing a young refugee defines the theatrical space around which a network of artists, citizens and audiences is gathered and connected. The choice of placing a giant silent presence at the centre of attention is a stage technique that reverses the traditional direction of the relationship between performer and audience. The main interest of *The Walk* is not the performance of Amal, but the reception of the public. Amal is not performing, she is walking and witnessing the “acts of welcome” created by local actors or improvised by the audience.¹⁸

Amal does not speak. Like other Handspring puppets representing subaltern or racialised people facing post-colonial contexts, she observes. The main activity of the puppet is focused on the complex mechanics of the eyes that are controlled by the puppeteer inside it. Amal is mute but has enormous and mobile eyes to watch the communities she is passing through, and to see how local citizens are or are not welcoming her.¹⁹ She receives invitations, gifts and refusals by authorities and mayors, she takes hits and attacks. With the enigmatic serenity of a mystical epic statue. It is certainly no coincidence that her creators, the Handspring, are fascinated by religious processions of self-moving statues. Having collaborated with Sogolon artists in Mali who craft traditional and sacred giant puppets, Handspring has elaborated an ontology of the puppet:

Why is it that audiences are so fascinated by this performance of life? I think that the answer lies with our primordial religious impulses. A belief in the life and agency of all things, including the

¹⁸ As Joe Murphy, the founder of Good Change, says: “The Walk gives us the possibility to re-perform the act of welcome that we failed to offer to asylum seekers” (Murphy 2021).

¹⁹ Throughout *The Walk*, the journey of Amal was filmed constantly by a crew that recorded her journey and the reaction of the public. The videos were shown on the social media channels Instagram and Facebook.

dead, originated with early humans in Africa, from whence it spread to and became part of many religions across the world. This belief in agency is deeply engrained in our psyches. (Jones 2009, 255)

Although *The Walk* is far from conveying a spiritual or religious aura,²⁰ the reaction of audiences amid amazement, emotion and astonishment suggests a pseudo-magical role of Amal's apparition. Her mere presence questions and unleashes different responses, which are at times affected by the local political situation.

Like Tadeusz Kantor's puppets of *Umarła klasa*,²¹ burdened by post-war Jewish shadows, Amal deals with the ghosts of European consciousness by carrying with her 35 million migrant children, many thousands of whom disappear every year. Kantor's notion of the "Theatre of Death" (1977) is perfectly embodied by this puppet which, as one of its creators said, "belongs to the people who are no longer there" (Jones 2021). Not forgetting that: "A puppet is by its very nature dead" (Jones 2009, 254).²²

Working on the notion of presence, absence and perception, Handspring focuses a part of their artistic, aesthetic and political action on pointing at the invisible in order to make it appear in the viewer's mind, without describing it. As Kentridge says about his collaboration with Handspring:

It's part of understanding that the world is something constructed, rather than *given*. [...] The bedrock of puppetry is a demonstration of how we make sense of the world. Puppeteering makes apparent things that we know but don't really see. (Kentridge 2009, 198)

That is why, contrary to what was initially envisioned by Good Chance, Handspring Puppet decided to avoid any realistic or evocative representation of the migratory condition, especially in its vulnerability and hardship. Inversely, the puppet created by Handspring is a theatrical system that drives the viewer into a participatory and authorial position, by setting his imagination in motion.

With the aim of bringing the public into the foreground, Handspring conceived a device for relationships, rather than a character.²³ As Jones states:

²⁰ Nevertheless, Kohler states "We are grappling to understand Amal's religious dimension" (Jones 2021).

²¹ The *Umarła klasa* (*The Dead Class*) is a piece created by Tadeusz Kantor in 1975.

²² These absences are evoked during the journey through the tributes offered in the places of transit where migrants often die, such as the Greek shore of Chios, the Bri-ançon mountain crossing and the coast facing the Channel.

²³ Amal is operated by a puppeteer walking on stilts and controlling "the harp", a complex tapestry of strings that animate the face, head and eyes, while two puppeteers

Amal is not real. She is artificial and you can see the puppeteer inside. She is an *empty machine* that invites the audience to fill the gap through imagination. (Jones 2021)

The suggestion of the empty machine, quoted by Jones, recalls the well-known theatrical notion of *empty space*, introduced by the English director Peter Brook, at the end of the 1960s (Brook 1968). The definition evokes the space left to the viewer to complete the work, to travel the distance separating their experience from the artistic act. Likewise, the physical and performative “emptiness” of Amal invites the public to re-create the reality. As a Handspring collaborator, Gerhard Marx, says:

It is within the audience that the puppet comes to life, rather than in the hands of the puppeteer. (Marx 2009, 247)

The active role of the spectator’s gaze is performed by the continuous and deliberate denial of fiction. The mechanisms within Handspring puppets are not hidden [fig. 2]. The skin of the puppet is transparent or open and reveals the interior apparatus manipulated by the puppeteer, in order to show how the illusion works, “providing a poignant reminder of the puppet’s ‘constructedness’”, as told by Gerhard Marx.

A common-sense assumption is that the puppet-makers would do all in their ability to hide the construction of the puppet in order to give the puppet the illusion of independence of movement and thus to sustain the illusion of the puppet having come to life. But Handspring reminds us in every aspect of the puppet’s making, that the puppet is constructed and, by implication, that the puppet as an autonomous being is a fictional construct. (243)

By declaring the fictional, in a quiet Brechtian way,²⁴ Handspring gives the viewer the agency to fulfil the work. The incessant dynamics between the visibility of the mechanisms and the invisibility of the creation completed by the spectator builds the play performed by each participant and by the public as a whole.

The puppet is animated through an almost-choral event, an entanglement of object, action, performance and various subjectivities. (245)

control each arm, in an extraordinary work of coordination. Eight puppeteers alternated along the journey, some of them with a migration background.

24 The distancing effect (or V-Effekt) coined by Bertolt Brecht is applied by disclosing and disrupting the fictive and constructed contrivances of stage illusion. In the case of *The Walk*, the mechanism of continuous alternation between the imaginary dimension and the emotional dis-identification is rooted in the viewer’s perception.



Figure 2 The puppeteer (left) is preparing to put on the puppet, while a member of the staff is checking 'the harp'. London, October 2021. Photo by the Author

The aesthetical device of the *empty machine* is also a response to the ethical criticalities concerning the representation of refugees. Through this non-fictional tool which has to be filled by the viewer's imagination, *The Walk* refuses any narrative or descriptive frame that is often adopted by theatrical and performative productions with/about migrants. As a growing scientific literature is pointing out (Jeffers 2012), most of these artistic works are focused on tragic tropes and refugee stories²⁵ usually written and directed by non-migrants. This testimonial imperative raises a series of ethical questions about representation and authorship that risk falling into a racialising approach. On stage, the refugee is often forced into the role of telling a biography of pain in front of the audience, waiting for the possibility of existing. He/she is worth as much as his/her story of traumas

²⁵ In particular, in the last decade, a number of theatrical plays have focused on narrative frames and the rhetoric of 'giving a voice' to refugees.

and persecutions, performed by a linguistic act that dangerously recalls the asylum interview required to obtain asylum status. Without agency, this role re-proposes a complacent variant of recycled victimising and stigmatising stereotypes.

Instead, *The Walk* presents a reverse personification of the asylum seeker, which does not illustrate a story. Amal walks across Europe and looks at us as citizens. She does not negotiate tragedy for a compassionate welcome in return. Her silent presence prompts the audience to critically consider the positionality and the perspective of their gaze. *The Walk* is an unspoken counter-narrative about migration shaped by the reactions and imaginaries of its multiple publics. In some way, it is a theatrical concretisation of the sociological notion according to which the migration issue is a mirror that reflects the contradictions of the societies involved (Sayad 1999).

4 From Gaziantep to Manchester: A Performative Challenge to Borders

On 27th July 2021, *The Walk* started in Gaziantep, on the border between Turkey and Syria, where thousands of Syrian refugees settle. When the puppeteer wore his stilts and Amal's skeleton for the first time, the street was filled with hundreds of Syrian children and the astonishment captured the artists even more than the audience. Basil Jones tells:

A woman told us that she had been travelling for 5 hours with her children to show them the giant puppet of a Syrian refugee girl. (Jones 2021)

The woman's determination to show her children a giant superheroine representing them, impressed Jones since one of the central issues of his artistic work is based precisely on projective identities. Having worked extensively with children who have uncertain or negative self-representation and live in racialised townships afflicted by Aids, drug addiction and alcoholism,²⁶ Handspring has developed a practice of empowerment through puppets, conceived as "emotional prosthesis" in situations of trauma and suffering (Taylor 2015).

The reaction of Syrian refugees in Gaziantep was a confirmation that Amal could become an emotional prosthesis and be brought to life by the audience

²⁶ Handspring Trust has been running a project in the marginalised area of Barrydale (South Africa) for ten years. The project intervenes in environmental apartheid, by designing new relational spaces and re-weaving bonds between the divided settlements.

who wants her to be alive. The puppet has a metaphorical nature: it belongs to all the people watching. [...] Every refugee comes with their story. [...] Many of them say: I am Amal. (Jones 2021)

Surrounded by children who wanted to talk with Amal or shake her hand, the artists reacted by opening up to this engaging and strong audience. The stop in Turkey revealed lucidly that *The Walk* would be a dramaturgy of encounters that the artists could neither control nor predict.

It also became apparent that the public reaction was incessantly shaped by political events. And while in Turkey, which hosts around 3 million Syrian refugees, Amal was warmly received by empathetic crowds composed of refugees, in Greece the reaction was quite different. The body of Amal became a political battleground in the harsh political debate on migration that polarised the country, and which was exacerbated in those days by the violent declarations of Nikolaos G. Michaloliakos, the leader of the far-right party Golden Dawn. In the town of Larissa, Amal was shouted at and even assaulted by neo-fascist agitators and right-wing protesters throwing food and stones at her and at the children gathered there. Labelled as “Muslim” by some media, (although there are no elements to indicate any religious affiliation),²⁷ Amal was banned by the religious authorities of the orthodox monasteries of Meteora, since her presence would have contaminated the holiness of the place.

And, while the debate on social media became fiery, the local political propaganda saw the performance as a good opportunity for visibility. Thus, after a visit to the migrant camp of Katsikas, Amal became the focus of a riot in Athens involving fascists, anti-fascists and the police, which forced the crew to cancel the planned event in Metaxourgio. The producers decided to have Amal appear on a roof terrace, from which she could be seen by a crowd of supporters. The reaction on social media reaction was quick: under the Facebook post announcing the cancellation of the Matxourgio event, the comments in Greek overflowed and someone wrote: “It appears that Greek right-wing extremists are scared of a doll”.²⁸

In Italy, the potential tensions were dampened thanks to the unexpected meeting with Pope Francis who has always shown great sensitivity to the cause of migrants, by carrying out many iconic actions.²⁹

²⁷ This proves that the Puppet works as a mirror device: its shapes and features are defined and interpreted according to the viewer’s perspective, which fills the “empty machine” with his imaginaries about migration.

²⁸ *The Walk* (3 September 2021), Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/walk-withamal>.

²⁹ The Pope’s first pastoral visit was in Lampedusa, producing a huge media echo. Afterwards, he visited the migrant camps of Lesbos.

The image of the Pope shaking Amal's hand gave massive visibility to the project, ensuring consensus and affiliations. Suddenly several cultural institutions that had previously been difficult to contact were now asking to get involved.³⁰

The Italian dates were accompanied by a certain general sympathy due to the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan which was covered by the national media with news and images of people trying to flee the country via Kabul airport. While European ministers were scrambling to inform citizens that they were working hard to save a few hundred Afghans affiliated with embassies, the support toward (certain types of) refugees was increasing.

In Milan, besides meeting the main theatrical institution, the Piccolo Teatro, Amal was welcomed by Emergency, an NGO that has been providing free medical care in Afghanistan for twenty years. Meanwhile, the founders of Good Chance, Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, were making contact with Afghan refugee communities and, shortly afterwards, the organisational team activated its network to make an urgent call on the British government to grant safe passage to Afghan artists, writers and filmmakers. Their open letter with the organisation Index on Censorship was published in the newspaper *The Times*, on 10 September 2021.

In France, the arrival of Amal was anticipated by the press ready to cover the theatrical action, after the echo aroused by the previous events and by the iconic images of the Pope welcoming the puppet in the Vatican. The producer who took the relay was Claire Béjanin, a brilliant performing arts producer best known for her remarkable work with asylum seekers (she is the founder of Good Chance France). The more than 40 events performed in France, Germany, Belgium and Switzerland were even followed by newspapers historically hostile to migration issues, such as *Le Figaro*.

The route organised by Béjanin shows strong attention to space, by alternating performances in the executive centres of Europe (the Council and the Parliament of Europe) with events of emblematic significance at the continent's gateways (borders, ports crossings). Evolving out of constantly shifting scenarios and impacted by pandemic shutdowns, political sensitivities and logistics, this leg of the journey was not easy. In Briançon, which is one of the harshest mountain border crossings used by people seeking to pass from Italy to France, the authorities did not allow Amal to cross the border. And in Calais, where Good Chance founded their first dome in the migrant camp, the city's mayor refused to access the beach, just a few days before the performance.

30 In Rome, Amal also met Baobab Experience, a dynamic community of migrants, activists, volunteers, supporters, that provides assistance to homeless people.

Béjanin felt it was important to assure these resonant steps of the migration journey, wanting to honour the people who try to overtake this dangerous route and the associations of volunteers which provide aid to them. So she found a way to organise, in Briançon, a treasure hunt with the village's children in search of the objects left behind by refugees on their way through the mountains. In Calais, Béjanin arranged a welcome punctuated by speeches and poetic interventions with hundreds of Calais residents, artists, and human rights advocates. Students and children accompanied Amal with a swarm of kites made with the scraps of the tents of migrants destroyed during the dismantling of their camps by the police. Finally, after a series of refusals by various mayors of coastal cities, the producer found a municipality, Bray-Dunes, that was ready to host an event in front of the water border of the Channel.

The focus on borders is a crucial factor in this part of the journey, which is characterised by events for large audiences, such as Amal's landing on the shores of Marseille escorted by different boats with the collaboration of the NGO SOS Méditerranée.

The Walk visited the gateways of Europe and burst into the heart of Fortress Europe, entering its institutions. At the European Parliament in Brussels, Amal delivered 10,000 letters written by children from around the world. At the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, she met the President of the Assembly and other parliamentarians who took advantage of the media opportunity to offer her a copy of the European Convention on Human Rights detailing the rights that would protect her during her peregrination.

Yet, according to the perspective of inversion that characterises *The Walk*, the centre is at the edge. Amal highlighted the peripheral places in which many associations operate, providing medical care, legal assistance and food to asylum seekers. As well as the associations supporting the rights of refugees, Amal visited the rallies of struggle too: in Brussels she stopped in the Church of Saint John the Baptist where a group of undocumented migrants was on hunger strike, demanding the regularization of their status. This proximity creates a complex confrontation between artistic work and reality, between performance and existence. As David Lan tells:

Two women were holding up a sheet of paper, which said "We are also human beings". I felt a pang thinking "Good God. We're going to bring a puppet in here. This is real, what we're doing is a play". (Lan quoted in Gentleman 2021)

The encounter with this extreme strategy of resistance empowered the artistic action. Aware of this, the producer repeatedly underlines the condition of privilege experienced by the troupe on the trail of the migratory path:



Figure 3 The Walk in London, October 2021. Photo by the Author

We've got to be really clear about that. The route we're taking is a route which refugees have taken, but we stay in hotels, we have passports. (Lan quoted in Gentleman 2021)

The arrival in the United Kingdom, in October 2021, was the highlight of the journey. Most of the institutions that had spent years collaborating on the project are based here. In London, a large public participated in the events organised by the Shakespeare's Globe, the National Theatre, the Southbank Centre and the Somerset House. In Trafalgar Square, a crowd made up of citizens, tourists and refugees converged to celebrate Amal [fig. 3]. The enthusiasm was augmented by an urgent political topic: in those days, the government was debating the Nationality and Borders Bill, which planned to punish people who enter the country illegally, with jail sentences of up to four years. A law that would detain Amal. Therefore, the English leg of the journey stood out for the support given by the associations for the rights of asylum seekers, marching and shouting slogans such as "Refugees are welcome here" and waving flags from asylum seekers' countries of origin. In Oxford the parade was followed by a man carrying the sign "Mimmo Lucano is innocent", referring to the trial of Domenico Lucano, the ex-mayor of Riace in Italy, who was sentenced to 13 years for alleged wrongdoing in the management of hospitality projects for refugees. The presence of immigrants and refugees pa-

rating in the centre of the ancient university city is significant. As Oxford's step shows, the march became a space of self-representation for migrants, acting as a spatial decolonisation of urban centres.

After a series of meetings through Oxford, Birmingham, and Coventry, the last stop was in Manchester, a city of historical working-class movements. In a spectacular final event, organised with the collaboration of the Manchester International Festival, the various communities of the region surrounded Amal. The participation of LGBTQ+ activists, celebrated drag queens, antiracist collectives, schools, musicians and footballers from local clubs opened up a network much more articulated than those seen in other cities, which had often been polarised into artistic intervention and social cooperation.

In Manchester, *The Walk* officially ended but, in the meantime, Amal has come to life, becoming a media icon for the cause of unaccompanied minors. The puppet continues to appear as a symbol on many subsequent occasions. A few days later, she was in Glasgow at Cop26, the UN Climate Change Conference 2021, standing alongside the Samoan activist Brianna Fruean to highlight the impact of the climate crisis on women from the Global South. Her presence at the Gender Day plenary, hosting indigenous activists and politicians, pointed to the close link between climatic change and migrant justice.

In December, Amal visited the British parliament to protest the proposed Nationality and Borders Bill, while Good Chance's social media channels asked to email a member of the House of Lords to demand safe routes for refugees.³¹ Later, in May 2022, during the war in Ukraine, Amal marched across the Ukrainian city of Lviv and at the Polish border where Ukrainians were displaced.³²

From her first step in Gaziantep, Amal has never stopped and her action has continued to reframe the narrative about migration in various ways. The attention to mass media and social media platforms, the production of an evocative iconography of Amal standing in the mythical sites of the European imaginary, the involvement of celebrities as ambassadors,³³ as well as the partnership of institutional collaborations, have amplified the mainstream visibility of the project. According to the event's website, Amal reached "an estimated 1 million people along the route of 13 countries she has visited, and tens of millions more online".³⁴

³¹ After Brexit, the situation for refugees has worsened in the UK, since the EU's Dublin Regulation has not been replaced with an equivalent regulation.

³² In September 2022, Amal is in New York, with 50 events created in partnership with St. Ann's Warehouse.

³³ Among them are Anish Kapoor, Cate Blanchett, Jude Law, Gillian Anderson, Michael Morpurgo, Anouska Shankar.

³⁴ <https://www.walkwithamal.org/past-events/>.

This extensive media coverage provoked a debate in the theatrical world.³⁵ Just a few days after its passage in the UK, some critics and artists shared their reflections in the British press on the need for free participatory art in public space, especially in times of pandemic. As the critic Verity Healey wonders:

[*The Walk*] certainly provides possibilities for some of the debates currently raging in the United Kingdom such as: Where does and where can theatre take place? For whom and by whom? [...] It's also a very bold exercise in exploring how big theatre can get. Just how many people can it reach? How many people from different cultures and countries can it involve? [*The Walk's*] larger audiences were people outside those arenas and occupying different societal spaces. Even the stone-throwing fascists in Greece are included in this audience. (Healey 2022)

As the founders of Good Chance Theatre often recall, it has always been a question of space. Their work is focused on a process of amplifying public theatrical space and reversing the perspectives between the centre and the edges. Working on the shifting threshold between large mainstream production and citizen public art, they propose a practice of creation based on grassroots networking and relational performance. With *The Walk*, temporary, itinerant and virtual publics join themselves and shape artistic, political and spatial actions in the name of free movement across borders.

35 Even the musical world participates in the debate with an article published in *Operawire* that criticised the Royal Opera House for having organised one of the rare private events of the travelling performance, addressed to a select audience (Lypustina 2021).

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