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Guthrie Theater Study Guide
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Refugia

ORIGIN: from Latin, literally ‘place of refuge;’ an area in which a population of organisms can survive through a period of unfavorable conditions.

A new theatre creation
From The Moving Company

Synopsis

Composed in nine chapters, Refugia is an investigation into the lives of those who find themselves at the crossroads of transition, navigating life’s margins. It explores humanity’s constant state of passage — geographically, emotionally, and physically, across those borders that only exist of our own creation.

“The first 15 years of the 21st century have been the most devastating years of any century around the globe in terms of wars and dislocation of communities based on their religious, racial or ethnic background,” shares director Dominique Serrand. “Our show is not an illustration of these acts, but rather a poetic journey about the larger sense of refuge.”

Chapter One:

The commons room of a nursing home somewhere in the United States

The nations on this earth will have great troubles. And every living thing with roots or legs or wings shall be made to wander. You see, I had been riding with the storm clouds, and had fallen to earth as rain, and it was there I saw the circled people in the valley. And I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw, for I was seeing the shapes of all things as they must live together as one being. And that place was filled with moaning. And with mourning. For all those displaced. Dispossessed. By the wind. Blowing. Without end. Like from a fever.

Refugia, Chapter 1, MAN
Chapter Two:

These boots were made for walkin.’ Port of entry: Sasabe, Arizona, July, 2014

Thugs with knives, came through the streets to slaughter children and through the streets the blood of the children flowed easily, like the blood of children

(I’m explaining a few things, Pablo Neruda)

Chapter Three:

On Friday, November 13, 2015, France witnessed the worst terrorist attack committed inside its territory. Six or seven simultaneous terrorist attacks took place throughout Paris. According to various sources, 130 people were killed (including 89 in the Bataclan concert hall) and more than 360 were injured. At least seven terrorists were involved in these “organized multifaceted” attacks which included mass shootings, hostage takings, and suicide bombings.

The “official” numbers on Islamic State recruitment in France downgrade the real figures, as many families refuse to admit that their children have fled to join the jihadists.

Converts do appear to make up a substantial portion of those attracted to ISIS (or Daesh) from France. One recent survey by the French Institute, CPDSI, found that 90% of those who adopted radical Islamic beliefs had French grandparents, and that 80% came from atheist families.

Over half of all phone calls to a government helpline, set up to combat jihadist recruitment, concerned teenagers without any Muslim or Arab background. The profiles of those attracted to Daesh ideology are hugely varied.

Any recruits that arrive are brutalized in a kind of initiation ceremony, and then they are forced to recruit four or five of their friends through Facebook. That’s why you have profiles that are so unpredictable, and why converts bring in more converts.

My family, they were emigrants in Algeria, we arrived here in France and we are emigrants. You are an emigrant. We are emigrants from emigrants, from emigrants, we have always been emigrants, and we will always be emigrants, and we will both die emigrants. But our son … he was born here. He is French.

*Refugia*, Chapter 3, AADHEEN
Chapter Four:

Because when it snows you don’t see it.
U.S.S.R. Border crossing. Vale/Posov, Georgia. Winter. 1957

Loosely based on the experience of composer Arvo Pärt as he and his wife were forced to emigrate from their home in Estonia, this chapter tells the story of Pärt’s music and its development.

As one of the most radical representatives of the so-called ‘Soviet Avant-garde’, Pärt’s work passed through a profound evolutionary process. In his collage works, ‘avant-garde’ and ‘early’ music confront each other boldly and irreconcilably, a confrontation which attains its most extreme expression in his last collage piece Credo (1968).

At the time of its première, Pärt’s open affirmation of his Christian faith (evidenced by the sung text in Credo) amounted to a political provocation, and it was viewed as an attack on the regime. This scandal was part of the incessant back-and-forth between approval and outright rejection he received in the U.S.S.R, and in 1980, Estonia’s communist government encouraged him to leave the country.

Emigrating to the West in January 1980 with his wife, Nora, and their two small sons, Pärt was stopped by border police for a luggage search. “We had only seven suitcases, full of my scores, records and tapes,” Pärt recalled. “They said, ‘Let’s listen.’ It was a big station. No one else was there. We took my record player and played ‘Cantus.’ It was like liturgy. Then they played another record, ‘Missa Syllabica.’ I think it is the first time in the history of the Soviet Union that the police are friendly.” He was joking, but not entirely. Later, when I asked Nora about that strange scene at the border, she said, “I saw the power of music to transform people.”

Production photos from the student production of Refugia at University of Texas at Austin, 2015.
Chapter Five:

...and the green tree seeing me weep, wept for me.
Somewhere along the coast of the Beaufort Sea. 2027.

Polar bears are in serious danger of becoming extinct due to global warming. The bears were the first vertebrate species to be listed by the U.S. Endangered Species Act as threatened by extinction primarily because of global warming. This listing happened in 2008 because of the ongoing loss of critical habitat for polar bears, which is the arctic sea ice on which they live and depend to hunt their prey.

In the southernmost populations around Canada’s Hudson Bay, the sea ice does not persist throughout the summer. We can expect to see a similar trend when the sea ice disappears in the arctic. In Hudson Bay, polar bears now spend summer months on shore when the ice has melted and there is no ice platform from which to hunt seals. As a result, they must fast for months. Remarkably, Hudson Bay polar bears have been able to catch enough seals during the winter to tide them over during this period of on-shore fasting. But this situation is changing fast because of climate change. Now the ice is melting earlier and forming up later, leaving an ever-shorter period in which to hunt. Hudson Bay bears are now much skinnier, have fewer cubs, the cubs they do have more frequently don’t survive to adulthood, and the interval between successful litters is growing. There is also more cannibalism of cubs by male bears. The patterns seen in Hudson Bay are beginning to occur now in more northern populations. This pattern is especially well documented on the north Coast of Alaska but appears to be the case worldwide. The increasing amount of open water between shore and the sea creates long swims for polar bears. During this long swim, cubs and adult bears have died. If they do reach the remaining ice it is over unproductive deep water where there are few seals to hunt. (National World Wildlife Federation)

Chapter Six:

Falling in love again. NATO refugee camp.
The Turkish/Syrian border. December, 2015.

Wars and persecution have driven more people from their homes than at any time since UNHCR records began. On average, 24 people were forced to flee each minute in 2015, four times more than a decade earlier, when six people fled every 60 seconds. A total of 65.3 million people are refugees or displaced from their homes by conflict and persecution. Based on the total world population, this is one person in 113, the highest number in recorded history held by the United Nations Refugee Agency. It well surpasses the number of refugees and displaced at the end of World War II.

And we will learn. We are Kurds. We have always learned. In each new land, wherever we have found ourselves, we learn. For centuries. As far back as we can say. And in all this time, not once, has the sun ever said to the earth: “you owe me.” Look what can happen from a love like that.

But today, the earth has disappeared from beneath our feet, and so we must go, we go from this harsh world that rains stones upon your tender face.

Run from all that does not make stronger your precious budding wings. Hold tight to all that makes you glad you are alive. And your heart will be like a sky that pours light. If not, you will rip to shreds all that you carry here ... inside you.

Refugia, Chapter 6, GRANDMOTHER
Chapter Seven:

Allah ‘ Akbar. Bodrum Peninsula, Turkey, December, 2015

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 1,000,573 refugees and migrants arrived in Europe from the Middle East and North Africa during 2015. Of these, some 850,000 landed on the Greek islands. Forty-nine percent were Syrian, 21 percent Afghan and eight percent Iraqi. Since the start of this year, a further 131,724 people have made the leap from Turkey to Europe, with the majority (122,637) entering the EU via Greece.

Many of the refugees trying to reach Greece, set out from the Bodrum Peninsula in Turkey.

Look at us... How did we end up here? Like this ... Come on. I won’t take your hand, but I’ll walk with you. We’ll get there. Somewhere. Somehow.

If Allah is watching ... what must he think ... The Father and the son, crossing the tumultuous Aegean Sea ... That place, filled with moaning. And with mourning. For the dead. And all those dispossessed. And the wind. Blowing. Without end. Like from a fever. For every living thing with roots or legs or wings, made to wander.

Refugia, Chapter 7, AADHEEN

Chapter Eight:

Hold my hand and we’re half-way there. The island of Lesbos, Greece. 2015

We have made here a place of dwelling. It is a great cave. A cave, dug deep into the side of the sheer face of a cliff wall. A place, in which a population could survive it seems, survive even through a period of unfavorable conditions. A kind of refuge, shaded from the heat of the noonday sun.

We live here, with so many others, others who have also found their way here. We are here, surrounded by others, all of the others. And I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing the shapes of all things, as they must live together like one being, wide as daylight, and in the center grew one tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father, and on the branches many leaves came out and murmured and in the leaves the birds began to sing. And beneath it in the shade was every living thing with roots or legs or wings, living together, where all could be happy.

Refugia, Chapter 9, MAN
Chapter Nine:


We have made here a place of dwelling. It is a great cave. A cave, dug deep into the side of the sheer face of a cliff wall. A place, in which a population could survive it seems, survive even through a period of unfavorable conditions. A kind of refuge, shaded from the heat of the noonday sun.

We live here, with so many others, others who have also found their way here. We are here, surrounded by others, all of the others.

And I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing the shapes of all things, as they must live together like one being, wide as daylight, and in the center grew one tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father, and on the branches many leaves came out and murmured and in the leaves the birds began to sing. And beneath it in the shade was every living thing with roots or legs or wings, living together, where all could be happy.

Refugia, Chapter 9, MAN
Four original members of The Moving Company – Dominique Serrand, Steven Epp, Nathan Keepers and Christina Baldwin – sat down with Guthrie Senior Dramaturg Jo Holcomb to talk about the source and traditions of their company and how their transformative play *Refugia* was born.

**JO HOLCOMB:** You have all shared a long work history, first at Theatre de la Jeune Lune and now with The Moving Company. Can you talk a bit about your work together?

**STEVEN EPP:** The Moving Company is the next incarnation of Theatre de la Jeune Lune. It’s a platform for continuing to create new work for the theater. We do research and develop our pieces by partnering with university and college theater departments to take the creative spark we find and develop it on a small scale with members of our acting company and the students. The initial aim is to mount smaller productions locally and then to see that work fully produced by partnering with larger companies like the Guthrie. The ultimate hope is that once a work is produced on that larger scale, it will have a long life traveling to other venues.

**JH:** Is there a specific philosophy behind how you begin a theater piece?

**DOMINIQUE SERRAND:** There is an organic way in which every work we do somehow plants seeds for another show at some point in the future. In the case of *Refugia*, it was a play that came to us out of an immediate world experience.

**NATHAN KEEPERS:** Each piece we do is a response to what’s happening in the world. It can take many forms. *Liberty Falls* 54321 (2015) was a response to the Republican primaries and the chaos we were seeing in the political system.
CHRISTINA BALDWIN: It’s the same with the source materials for a piece like *Come Hell and High Water* (2011) which was based on a novel. Even if it’s older, existing material, it’s responsive.

NK: I also think there has been a general theme that found its genesis with Jeune Lune and is now emerging strongly with The Moving Company: the shows are not necessarily about conflicts among the characters, but rather an overall theme of conflict with the world. That opens up the work.

JH: How do you collaborate in the rehearsal room?

SE: Part of what we do is based on shared history. In order to get to the point of being able to create successfully and productively, we had to develop shared knowledge, experience and vernacular. There are reference points now that create a shorthand in the room. But there are still failures along the way and sometimes great success, and we learn equally from both.

CB: There is a trust that has developed. That’s why we have the freedom to do the wrong thing in order to get the right result.

SE: We know that the answer usually will reveal itself. I think when you’re a younger artist you can panic a bit more and think, “How are we going to fix this problem?” Like anything, the longer you do it, it’s easier to say, “It will work out fine, we’ll find it.”

NK: We’re also able to trust that it’s not on any one of us to find the answer in one of our pieces. We do it collectively.

CB: One challenge when we’re working with actors who aren’t used to this method is making sure they feel welcome to fail. Most theater training these days does not prepare you for that. You’re taught to come in ready to go with something solid. But we need malleability. We’re looking for clay, not a bronze sculpture.

DS: One of the key elements to The Moving Company is our structure. It’s a structure of respect and companionship. And we know who amongst us is better at some things. Everyone becomes a specialist in his own voice. You’re not looking at a director for answers. You’re looking at talents in the room who are developing a piece. Everyone participates in the creation of the work.

NK: There’s a respect for letting the work unfold. We’re not forcing something to happen. It becomes what it is as we work towards the finished product, and we’re very respectful of that.

SE: It’s what theater director Peter Brook calls a “formless hunch” – that sense that there’s something worth exploring, and you trust and go at it.

JH: How did you decide which refugee stories to include? *Refugia* encompasses every border and passage —

DS: You don’t really decide. You go up on your feet and talk through the stories. We have to remember that we’re doing a theater piece. It has to find a theatrical translation on the stage, and if it doesn’t work, you don’t force it.

NK: We are always looking for something that is theatrical but also has poetry. There’s something about a true story when the themes and essence have a certain poetry that allows us to make it theatrical.

DS: As you do your work, you try to refine it. You don’t refine it through the mechanics of writing. You refine it through the actors. It’s the actor who opens up the moments that we create. The more we rehearse, the more we develop that quality that we touch or approach. The whole point of The Moving Company is to move people. From the moment they enter the room to the moment they leave, something happens that moves them. The more we can contribute to making people think – that’s what we are working toward. ☛