A Knock on the Door: A non-fiction artefact and exegesis

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Abstract

This thesis examines the way refugee theatre activists responded to negative media coverage of asylum seekers in Australia. It also reflects on the relative lack of journalists' perspectives in academic debates over the issue, which were highly critical of the profession. These linked problems are addressed in two ways - a non-fiction book of 14 chapters called *A Knock at the Door* and an accompanying exegesis. The book examines theatre activism as a counter-narrative to the prevailing media coverage, which many saw as influenced by Howard Government attempts to reduce sympathy for asylum seekers. The exegesis analyses the method and inspiration for the primary text, examining the problem of media coverage from the perspective of a practising journalist who covered the issue extensively during this period. I saw in the theatre production some parallels to the possibilities in journalistic practice. As I note in the artefact: "the news page was my stage."

Academic studies have raised serious questions over the nature of this coverage. For example, Klocker and Dunn (2003) found that a reliance on government statements contributed to negative perceptions of asylum seekers. Criticism of this type has, however, frequently neglected the perspectives of media practitioners. This is not to say that the criticism is unwarranted, but aspects of the research would have benefitted from insights on how the media operates and why certain decisions were made.

The study uses auto-ethnography, a qualitative research method which analyses the personal “to understand the cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011).
The book reflects on theatre as a counter-narrative in countries including South Africa, from which I migrated in the apartheid-era. It draws on material including newspaper reports, transcripts and audio-visual recordings of two theatre productions, one of which is the main focus of this study. It uses archival material, semi-structured interviews with asylum seekers, activists and others as well as personal observations.

The book shows how a modestly funded, grassroots production in which mostly untrained “actors” told their stories, succeeded where studies suggest the media often failed, alerting the public and ultimately decision makers, in a series of meetings between the players and politicians, to the “human story”. It takes its title from the decision by the Melbourne learning centre that coordinated the theatre action to open its doors to hundreds of Iraqis, Afghans, Iranians and other TPV-holders turned away elsewhere because their visas excluded them from federally funded language classes.

The exegesis analyses the media’s role and performance in reporting on asylum seekers from the perspective of a journalist. It draws on an extensive reflexive journal to examine the processes of creating the artefact and the extent to which one of the plays, Kan Yama Kan, fulfilled a role historically expected of the media: informing and providing context.

The exegesis presents two complementary lines of enquiry: one about how my own practice as a journalist sheds light on how the media operated; the other about how theatre filled a (partial) gap left by journalistic practice. It explores the book’s narrative in the context of academic literature on media coverage and activist arts, literary influences on the book’s structure, ethical dilemmas that impacted on the writing, and methodology. It considers the extent to which the theatre activism enabled the players to meet Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire’s requirement “reflective participation in the act of liberation” (Freire 1996).
Both artefact and exegesis reflect on the impact of this theatrical campaign and the way in which storytelling subverted propaganda and, Augusto Boal (1995), the founder of the form known as Theatre of the Oppressed, has written of theatre, functioned as a “weapon” for change. Both components reflect on the role of theatre at a time when studies found that media coverage was at odds with the Fourth Estate notion of a “bulwark against 'tyrannical governments’” (Economou and Tanner 2008).
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Above all, a special thanks to my wife, Ramola and our sons, Neal and Rohan, for their support through the years.
Declaration

I certify that the thesis entitled ‘A Knock on the Door: A Non-fiction book and an Accompanying Exegesis’ submitted for the degree of PhD contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma; to the best of my knowledge contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; and is not based on joint research or publications.

Full name: Larry Schwartz
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The Artefact

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR

By Larry Schwartz
“....What is the knocking?

What is the knocking at the door in the night?

It is somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels.

Admit them, admit them”

D.H. Lawrence. Song of a Man Who Has Come Through

“In the dead of the night

There’s A Knock at the Door

The urgent voice tells you to flee…”

Kavisha Mazzella and Arnold Zable. All God’s Beggars
Dramatis Personae

Michael Aboujundi – a Syrian asylum seeker who changed his name from Usama after the September 11 terror attacks.

Adil Alsafi – Iraqi refugee who twice took a boat to Australia

Mohammad al-Janabi – Iraqi asylum seeker who cast seven stones as he left Woomera

Bob Brown – former Greens leader

Julian Burnside – barrister

Tahir Cambis – filmmaker

Carmel Davies – English language teacher/ theatre director

Anne Horrigan-Dixon – then Fitzroy Learning Network director who opened the door when others were turning people away

Aoham al Dujali – Iraqi asylum seeker who remained behind a screen onstage

Kate Durham – artist

Mohammed Arif Fayazi – Hazara asylum seeker

Alice Garner - actor

Anne Heintz – Student from Tucson, Arizona, who helped during the Canberra trip

Robin Laurie – theatre director/ dramaturg

Carmen Lawrence – former WA Premier and Federal MP

Lisa Maza – actor

Mark Madden – political strategist

Kavisha Mazzella – singer-songwriter

Lara McKinley – media coordinator for refugee activist groups

Ahmad Raza - Hazara asylum seeker who carried a book of poems by the Sufi poet, Hafez, with him on the boat to Christmas Island.

Majid Shokor - Iraqi-born actor
Heather Stock – retired secondary school teacher

Scott Thornton – retired insurance worker who ran the Fitzroy Learning Network office

Jafar Yawari – Hazara asylum seeker who first knocked at Fitzroy Learning Network’s door.

Arnold Zable – author
PROLOGUE

Thirty six hours to curtain-up. It’s all too easy to say, the show must go on. But what if the performers just can’t anymore? A player in a travelling show recalled an afternoon in a small theatre in Canberra: “It was a heartbreaking thing for every single one - the audience, us, musicians; everyone was in tears.” It was late 2003 – a day before they were to enter Parliament House to perform and plead for the right to remain in Australia. “Some of us decided, look, it’s too much. It is too much for everyone. Women and men were crying. It was too hard for everyone.”

There is a slight darkness about this man’s eyes. He can see from here to there – perhaps only the people in the front row - but no further. He has a way of tilting his head as he listens. You’d think he’s attending to his own thoughts only. He stoops slightly, furrows his highset brow. He speaks quietly, weighing each word. The accent is hard to pick. You might think him a man for the margins; someone who will stay in the shadows. You’d be wrong.
CHAPTER ONE

Forty four months to curtain-up. Call him Michael. He entered the razor wire in South Australia’s Simpson Desert in a month in which the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh toured Australia. When he reached the detention centre at Woomera, about 3am, he was still expecting a temporary stay, possibly in high-rise accommodation. The first night, 11 men shared a caravan. He was on the top bunk. The vast ocean swelled about his shut eyes. The next morning, he woke to heat and dust behind wire. Strangers confided they’d been there for months. “We realised we had to live in that desert,” he’d reminisce onstage in a show that criss-crossed city and countryside before heading to the national capital. “One month; one year ... No one knows.” Days passed, each much like the day before. These were times of tedium, punctuated by meals at two long tables, eaten with spoons. Breakfast was “bloody cornflakes every day”. “We’d never eaten them before.” More idle hours until lunch from noon to 2pm. Rice, spaghetti, potato, occasionally chicken. Dinner - 5pm to 7pm - was often fish and chips.

By June 2000, Woomera housed an estimated 1600 people. There was no radio, no mail, no visitors. The detainees had held peaceful demonstrations. Now they broke a fence and walked into town. Two groups left on the night of June 8. Michael was in a third, chanting that they wanted freedom, about 9am the following day. Kilometres on in the town of Woomera, “a woman came out of her house just to look at us. Some people were waving their hats at us”. Children offered the escapees bananas anreferendum bread. They asked to see the Immigration Minister. “We thought he didn’t know what was going on.” They returned to the centre nervously, expecting punishment. Australasian Correctional Management (ACM) officials burst into rooms throughout the night demanding identity numbers.

Michael left Woomera that August in the harsh afternoon light in a month of rioting and fires. He’d been held for five months until his release on a three year-temporary protection visa. Watching others go, he’d wish he was with them. Now, finally, he was free. So he thought.

****
In his tidy lounge room, Michael has a goldfish bowl. A friend gave it to him after he learned finally in June 2004 he would be able to remain in Australia. “You’re permanent now,” she told him. “You can look after the fish. You don’t have to worry about leaving them’.

He’d left behind his mother, six brothers and four sisters after authorities came looking for him at the family home in Damascus. “Me and my friends, late at night, we would just drive,” he’d reminisce onstage. “Work was early next day. No matter. We’d drive for six or seven hours, go to a faraway beach, far away cafes. Eating, laughing. Sometimes the car would break down. No matter. We’d go home and sleep for one hour then go to work. Still, no matter; I was having a very happy time with my friends. I’ve never been in a political party. But one day the police stopped me and my cousin. They took our IDs, hit us, then let us go. Two days later they come to our homes. I was at work. My cousin was home. So they took him. My mother rang me and said, ‘Don’t come home.’ I hid for three months. My cousin disappeared. No one knows anything about him. I was a suspect in my country - and that is enough.”

At the bottom of the goldfish bowl in his Melbourne flat is a grey plastic naval vessel. It reminds Michael of the Royal Australian Navy vessel that spotted the boatload of asylum seekers four days after they departed the island in March 2000, and accompanied them to Darwin two days later. “We were on a horrible, terrible, small, tiny, leaking, fishing boat. Seventy-five people; you couldn’t find a place to sleep or just move around.”

****

Early 2010. A stout neighbour walking a small dog said a cheery hello as I approached Michael’s commission flat. She’d seen me wave as I rounded my car into a near parking space. I was there to see a partly blind man who took the name of the son of a woman who taught him English after planes brought down the New York towers almost a decade earlier. “When September 11 happened I just felt horror.”

Usama, as he was then, found himself in “a few situations where I was rejected”. He’d ring to book a cab. They’d ask his name. “Taxis wouldn’t bloody arrive. People would go, ‘no’.” Though he made a point of explaining he spelled Usama with a “U” not an “O”, he couldn’t avoid being associated with the then elusive al-Qaeda leader Bin Laden. Co-workers at the computer parts warehouse would tease him. “Oh yes you are a hero. You are Osama.” “And
it just made me feel sick; absolutely sick. I did not hesitate to ask everyone to please call me Michael.”

The mood was sombre at the warehouse that day. Some refused outright. No way would they call him Michael. One man announced he was off to the mosque to ask the imam if it was okay.

“Why don’t you come with me?”

Michael was adamant. “You go and do whatever you like but I will not answer if you call me Usama anymore.”

They came round and, after several months, the man who was once Usama “became Michael”.

When we met in the early 2000s he was Michael Morton, briefly adopting the surname of someone else who taught him English at an inner Melbourne community centre.

Some people persisted with Usama. “I said, ‘Okay, whatever’.”

A woman there told him he would remain “Usama to me”.

“Only me. I’ll call you Usama’.”

He put up with it for a while. “Not any more now. Now if she sends me an email it’s Michael. It took a while but this is what I want. I want people to call me Michael.”

He’d remain Usama to his family. “I don’t expect my brothers and sisters to call me Michael.” After his release from detention, he’d chat with them by telephone and Webcam. Once he put an elderly neighbour on the line to his mother. One woman spoke Arabic, the other English. They knew enough to say hello.

He was not yet 30 when we met briefly in mid-2002 at a rehearsal in a high-ceilinged Uniting Church hall in wintry Melbourne for a stage production featuring Iraqis, Afghans, Iranians and others with temporary visas. I was there as a journalist to report for a Sunday paper and he among the players, some still struggling to master the English language, others fairly fluent. A small heater glowed high on a wall while they prepared for a show at the Trades Hall in Carlton.

****
I once invited Michael to accompany me to Woomera. An editor approved my proposal to write a feature story on the camp soon after its closure in early 2003. I thought I might walk through the red sand country with him, loosely following the route he’d taken with chanting escapees on the morning of June 9 2000. What chance we might encounter on the few kilometres from the detention centre some who came out to watch them pass, waving hats or offering bananas and bread?

“Before June 2000, no one knew about us,” Michael would tell audiences at the show that took its title, *Kan Yama Kan*, from the Arabic for Once upon a Time. “No one saw us and no one came. We were isolated. There was no TV, no newspapers, no letters, no phone, nothing. We had been detained for months. Nothing had happened. Not one person had been released. We wanted the management to come and talk to us; to tell us what was happening. Why we were locked up. We broke down the fence and went to the township of Woomera to protest – not to escape, just to protest. We found ourselves in a park. There were people everywhere. I thought to myself, I’m in Australia. The media was all around – TV, radio, newspaper journalists all standing around watching us as if we were animals. Some got us food and water. I saw a payphone. I could ring my mum.”

He’d pick up an imaginary phone, pretending to deposit a coin and dial a number.

- Hello Mum. Mum, how are you?

From behind a screen onstage:

- Who are you?
- It’s your son Usama.
- You do not sound like Usama.
- I am Mum. I am.
- Your voice is different.
- I’ve been shouting in a protest.
- Is my son dead? Are you trying to trick me.
- Mum, I’m alright and I’m ringing to see how you are.
- How I am? I miss my son. I miss my little boy. What happened to him? When will I see him? Will I hold him again? How is he? How is he?
- Mum stop crying I’m alright now. I love you Mum. I’m just ringing to let you know I’m alright. I’ll ring you again soon, I promise.

Michael is still traumatised by months in captivity. Touching fencing at a station near his flat several years after a bus ride to Melbourne, he lost his balance and “just fell down” in a moment of confusion, reminded of the wire around the camp. Some days Michael he’s fine. But at times something on television or radio about boat arrivals, upheaval in lands they had fled or even some dismissive remark about asylum seekers stirs deep depression. Will he ever get over it? “No, simply, no. You probably get over it for a while, but it will never ever leave you alone. Never. It’s there. It’s a big scar. It will never heal.”

****

I asked Michael why he’d agreed to go back with me to a place that continued to traumatis him. He had discussed this with close friends days earlier, he told me. “We were talking about it, for some reason. And I said yes I’d go. Definitely I would go. I mean, it wasn’t about me. I’m one person. I can deal with it. It was about bringing awareness to the community about what happened in that hell hole of Woomera detention centre. I knew it would be traumatic. I knew it could be terrible. I knew it could affect my mental state. I knew all the rest. But I do remember that you offered psychological support, counselling or whatever. I did agree whether there was counselling or not.”

I had forgotten the offer. “Yes you did. I do remember quite well. You told me that you were not sure how I was going to react when we got there.”

He was determined to get the word out even after closure and transport of the last detainees to the then new Baxter detention centre near Port Augusta almost 200km south east – and would have endured the return to Woomera to let people know what had happened there. I interviewed him, among others, for a feature on Woomera but we did not visit the camp. The editor decided against it, possibly out of concern for Michael’s wellbeing, possibly because the trip would have proven costly. I regretted that decision at the time. “I was very disappointed myself,” Michael said. “But what could I do?”

****
In the first few months in Melbourne, he’d look out from a sixth floor commission flat on busy Hoddle Street. “The only thing I could clearly see was Collingwood town Hall because it’s quite big and beautiful. I had no idea what to do.”

He heard that some organisation was offering language classes nearby. “Sorry,” said the woman to whom he had explained the urgent need to learn since his release after months behind the wire. Woomera? She didn’t appear to have heard of it. A temporary visa? “She had absolutely no idea. That was normal at that time. No one knew much about it. She empathised with me but, after she made a phone call, said sorry, and I knew that meant bad luck.”

“Got any spare change?” high-rise neighbours would ask.

“Got a ciggie?”

Change? A ciggie?

“I didn’t know what they were talking about. This is how I started, exchanging money and cigarettes for the language.”

After a few months an Iraqi man at the flats said he’d heard of a place in Fitzroy that might help with language and computer skills. Michael was cautious.

“Can you come with me there?”

They made their way up Hoddle, turned left at the lights at Smith, went along side-streets, reaching a red-brick double-storey in Napier Street.

And it was there that he was finally able to attend language classes and took a new name.

Could I as a migrant, who flew in the comfort of a passenger liner to the welcome of relatives at Sydney airport and work as a rookie reporter weeks later, ever understand what he had endured? “Maybe you would understand it, but it is extremely hard to explain. Where do I start? It’s not a question of a good day or a bad day. If we’ve got the TV on now and something comes up, it crosses my mind once, twice, 10 times.”
As I write this, more than a decade after the asylum seekers and supporters took their show to Canberra, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, dismissing asylum seekers in Australia who had arrived by sea as “fake refugees”, gave them just over four months to apply for refugee status or face deportation. The CEO of the Melbourne-based Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Kon Karapanagiotidis, responded with a statement, saying 24,500 people, including 4395 children, were affected by the October 1 2017 deadline and 7500 people were desperately trying to find legal support to lodge their protection applications. In his appeal for public support, Karapanagiotidis said no government had dared to do “something so unlawful and despicable” in the 62 years since Australia ratified the Refugee Convention. Those who failed to apply to meet “impossible deadlines” would lose their right to seek asylum, all welfare support and access to Medicare. They were denied a fair hearing and review because the government had cut legal funding by 90 per cent, forcing people to lodge applications requiring them to answer 116 questions without proper legal advice. The application forms were only available in English.

Some readers might wonder at the telling of a time when it seemed at least there was a chance of settling in Australia – less forbidding than in the years since the Gillard government re-introduced offshore processing in 2012 and Kevin Rudd, soon after being returned as Prime Minister by a struggling Labor government the following year, announced that no-one arriving by boat would gain asylum here.

Some might point to the hypocrisy in a commitment to accepting 12,000 Syrian refugees while insisting that Syrians already in detention remain there. A time when boats are turned back people smugglers paid by our government to take people back to countries including Indonesia and Malaysia. A time when we rely on impoverished Nauru and Papua New Guinea to accommodate refugees and ignore death, mental illness and sexual assault in offshore centres and, with PNG’s Supreme Court ruling the centre on Manus Island is illegal, looking to the United States to take on an unspecified number from these islands. A time when we threaten social workers, teachers and others on island detention centres with jail sentences if they tell us the truth about conditions and disregard our responsibility as a signatory to a 1951 UN Convention on Refugees under which people have a right to seek asylum.
Why dwell on a group who successfully negotiated their stay in Australia more than a decade ago, some might wonder? Why not tell us about Reza Barati, beaten to death by locals in detention at Manus Island on February 17, 2014; Hamid Kehazaei, dead because officials delayed treating an infection at Manus Island on September 2, 2014; Fazel Chegeni, said to have taken his own life in Christmas Island detention centre on November 8, 2015; Omid Masoumali, who died after setting himself on fire at the Nauru centre on April 29, 2016; or Faysal Ahmed, who sustained a brain injury and died in hospital in Brisbane after being finally flown from Manus Island on Christmas eve 2016?

Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish journalist and activist held on Manus Island, wrote an article published in *The Huffington Post* on April 27 2017 that Australia’s policy of offshore detention was “fundamentally established on the basis of lies and concealment”. The article appeared days after Immigration Minister Peter Dutton had defended his claims on ABC TV’s Insiders program that Papua New Guinea soldiers fired bullets into the centre after reports that asylum seekers had led a boy into the detention centre, despite the insistence by the island’s police commander that the incident was not related to concern the safety of the boy he said was 10.

Boochani wrote of “the government’s fiction” that seeking asylum was illegal. Australians tolerated the abuses on Manus and Nauru islands “by thinking wrongly that we are the ones who have committed a crime”. “After each devastating event during the past four years, like the deaths of fellow refugees, the Immigration Minister or spokesperson has never considered our side of the story. They have felt safe in the knowledge that this system is built on concealment and deceit. Journalists are denied access to the centre and most staff still risk prison sentences if they speak out. We on this remote island do not have enough power to defend ourselves against the Australian government’s misinformation because most of the media listen to what the officials say, and not to the refugees who have been forced both out of sight and, seemingly, outside of any legal system where we could seek redress.”

****

Almost 11 years after the last curtain-call for *Kan Yama Kan*, I went to see a Melbourne language teacher who initiated the theatre action at the heart of this book. “It’s a
continuum,” Carmel Davies explained the motivation for a show she was staging for refugees from countries including Sri Lanka, Tibet, Sudan, Eritrea and Afghanistan. “The stories change. New people come in and the stories are very similar in terms of people suffering needing to escape, needing to be protected, needing security, needing a new home. That is the similarity in everybody’s stories. The difference is the government policies are getting worse and worse.”

The players were rehearsing the show in a week in June 2014 when news broke that a Tamil man on a bridging visa died after dousing himself in petrol and setting himself on fire in Geelong, following a similar incident in Sydney months earlier. “As ordinary Australians what can we do? It’s very hard to do anything. All we can do is keep telling people this is what is happening so people don’t turn their backs and forget.”

****

Eight months later. Almost 40 people filled every seat in the tiny La Mama Theatre. A young man near the front, looking uncertainly about him, stood to a recording of Advance Australia Fair. Then each of us was on our feet. It was Valentine’s Day 2015. We were there to see a play in which a Sri Lankan asylum seeker is driven to despair in indefinite detention during which he learns that ASIO has listed him as a potential security threat. At one point, he questions lines in the anthem: “For those who’ve come across the seas/ We’ve boundless plains to share”.

The Process was described in program notes as “a work of fiction which explores the asylum seeker policies of two successive governments and tells the story of one representative refugee caught up in the immigration process, not through realism, but through satire and heightened reality, using the literary devices of exaggeration, distortion, condensation and irony …”

The actor portraying asylum seeker Rajoo Mahalingham, previously performed in Singapore, Australia and New York. He had a master’s degree from the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) in Sydney and trained with Stella Adler’s Studio in New York City. He had a strong interest in the Polish theatre director, Jerzy Grotowski, and was at La Mama the previous year in a play co-written by South African playwright Athol Fugard.
There was no suggestion that he was ever held in a detention centre. Nor need he have been. He was an actor. So compelling was the portrayal, you’d think he might have. Certainly, the play deserved a wider audience. When I rang the next day, someone at the theatre told me they were considering taking it elsewhere. I wondered later what might have happened if one of the actors suggested to another that they go to Canberra, as Michael once had. Would the other have replied that anything is possible?

****

Thursday, July 18 2002. The names of 13 year-old Alamdar Baktiyari and his 12 year-old brother, Muntazer, who had handed themselves at the British consulate in Melbourne weeks after a mass breakout from Woomera were chalked on a blackboard at the entrance to Victorian Trades Hall on the northern edge of Melbourne the night on which Kan Yama Kan opened. The blackboard promised access to an “alternative” SKA TV program on the free Channel 31 and a “special” on the Baktiyari brothers. An arrow on that board directed us upstairs to the New Ballroom Theatre, a venue that seated up to 200. Someone had detailed performances over the next 10 days and nights. Tickets were advertised at $20 and $12 concession. But such was the interest by then, the sign sported a red diagonal “SOLD OUT”.

Weeks earlier, the Immigration Minister announced that the first temporary protection visas, issued in November 1999, would expire later that year and those seeking to remain in Australia would have to apply for another protection visa or leave. In those weeks, his department opened a “highly specialised document examination laboratory” at its Sydney offices to examine the authenticity of documents including passports and visas. A new bill passed through Parliament preventing failed asylum seekers from appealing against decisions on the grounds of a breach of natural justice. The first group of Afghans to accept the Australian Government’s $2000 reintegration package returned to Afghanistan. A day after Kan Yama Kan’s opening night, the Baktiyari brothers were reunited with their mother in detention at Woomera.

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“Welcome.” Alice Garner was one of three professional actors in the otherwise untrained troupe. “Tonight you will hear stories,” she introduced the play at the venue on the edge of the city and in an inner suburb that was home to successive generations of Jewish and Italian migrants and refugees. “Tales of kindness and cruelties; tales which will make you laugh and, alas, weep.”

Garner was a co-founder of the activist group, Actors for Refugees. She knew from the outset that this was going to be different from professional theatre productions. She was there from the first workshops when wary players slowly revealed the bits of their stories they could bear to talk about. She quickly understood the importance of trying to establish trust. She’d look for faces of some who failed to turn up. She’d watch others arrive late. They didn’t seem to know what it was all about. “They were coming along thinking, what on earth have I said I’d do.”

Garner told the audience that on this night we would hear “tales of cities of roses and circles of fish cooked from the inside. Of winged lions, of snow covered mountains, great rivers, vast deserts and of a king with a stone for a heart...” Kan Yama Kan was conceived as “a 21st century One Thousand and One Arabian Nights” with the players’ stories “told to keep hope alive”. When Alice Garner spoke onstage of “a king with a stone for a heart,” she was alluding to cruel Shahriyar, kept from killing by fabulous stories told by a vizier’s daughter, Scheherazade. The actor might as well have been talking about antagonism among those to whom the players would go to Canberra to plead their case through storytelling and song. This then was the challenge – to soften hard hearts.

Let me confess here that I can count the number of times I’ve been to the theatre in decades in Australia on one hand - three or four fingers at most. Had I not been assigned to write about the rehearsal for Kan Yama Kan, it’s unlikely I would have been in the packed crowd on opening night. But sitting there days after I met the players, I found myself thinking everyone should see this. Maybe it was this: I saw in the theatre production some parallel to the possibilities in journalistic practice. The news page was my stage. The challenge was to tell stories to tens of thousands of potential readers. In a sense my job, as I saw it, was to make the strangers less strange.
There was no talk yet of taking the show to the capital. But this would be the measure – not the enthusiasm, or otherwise, of those who came to the show in small venues in city, suburbs and small towns but the extent to which they were able to reach out to those empowered to decide their futures. There would be times when each surely wondered if it was not folly to attempt such a thing. Who would hear their cry? Who would care?

Decades had passed since the Whitlam Government formally ended the White Australia policy and Malcolm Fraser's response to Indo-Chinese refugees substantially changed Australia's position on Asian immigration. Successive governments implemented policies aimed at discouraging flight here. The Keating government introduced mandatory detention in 1992; the Howard government the temporary protection visa (TPV) category seven years later. The harsh attitude, particularly to those arriving on boats, was so popular in some quarters that Howard’s refusal in late 2001 to allow the Norwegian freighter MV Tampa to enter Australian waters with 369 men, 26 women and 43 children, mostly Hazara refugees rescued from a fishing stricken vessel, is credited with helping him win a difficult election.

I wondered afterwards to what extent we in the media alerted the community to the harmful consequences of policies later credited with stopping the boats by the end of 2001. To what extent did we go along with popular perceptions?

Newspapers and other media can and do on occasion call for change. “Mr Howard has asked the Australian people to re-elect his government on the basis of his stand on asylum seekers,” Melbourne’s broadsheet, The Age, told its readers before the 2001 election. “He has asked them to re-elect his government on the basis that he has shown true leadership on this issue. We believe the opposite is true: he has shown no leadership on this crucial issue. He has pandered to fear. He does not deserve the support of the Australian people.”

But there is also a wariness of upsetting readers and undermining sales and advertising that can foster a conservatism and reluctance to challenge assumptions.

Barrister, human rights and refugee advocate Julian Burnside once wrote that though Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers during this period “constitutes a grave crime against our own laws”, the mainstream press was too frightened, too weak, too compliant, or too stupid to bother reporting the fact and its silence would come to be regarded as “part of our
national disgrace”. His damning criticism of media coverage at the time echoes a common theme in academic studies of the reportage on the “fourth wave” of boat people to arrive in Australia between 1999 and 2001. Almost every account I have read so far contains some measure of criticism of the media’s perceived failure to properly inform and alert the community to the plight of the refugees. Did we deserve such condemnation? Had members of a little-known theatrical production with a mostly amateur cast succeeded where we failed? Or had the organisers cannily worked with the media to increase chances of alerting the public, and politicians, to their plight?

At the church hall rehearsal, I was hardly aware of Michael, though I did note the change of name in the newspaper report I wrote at the time. I was taken with others’ vivid stories. One man told of summer nights in Baghdad. Boyhood friends would light small candles to dangle from kites they’d fly from the rooftops. A woman among 80 on a boat from Lombok remembered the excitement after spotting an Australian aircraft overhead near Ashmore Reef. She told how she waved and shouted to attract the pilot’s attention. “At last,” she thought, “we are safe”.

She could not understand why she was detained soon afterwards. “I was shocked because I’m not a criminal. I was a teacher. And I have children. I’m well educated. I never did anything wrong in my life. So why was I put in a jail?”

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Months after quitting a long time newspaper job at The Age, I went back in search of Michael and others including the woman on the boat from Lombok. Someone had suggested I write a book about activists in this period. A publisher approached me to do it. I went back to find something left behind. I wasn’t sure what. But I knew I had unfinished business: a story that needed to be told. Michael was a key to that story. There were others but he was central.

I visited Michael on a fine summer day in 2010 in a month of disquiet after the stabbing of a young Indian man in inner suburban Yarraville and attacks on Indian students elsewhere in Melbourne. Michael was on the walkway outside the flat with his next-door neighbour, Sylvia, who had celebrated her 91st birthday days earlier. He once told me he has felt as though he has found in Sylvia “my mum, my grand mum . . . I felt just so much at home.”
Sylvia Hammond was a little anxious some years earlier when the man calling himself Michael moved in next door to the housing commission flat that had been her home for several years. “The first thing I said is, ‘I hope you're quiet’,” she’d told me. Michael remembered the exchange just a little differently. “I think you said, ‘you're not bloody noisy are you? They’d laughed together at this. “I said ‘we’re all very quiet people here and that’s the way we want it’,” Sylvia said.

She was a childless widow of a “stoker petty officer” at Flinders Naval Depot and regarded Michael as all but an adopted son. For about six months Sylvia knew him as Michael. Then, “somebody addressed you as Usama, didn't they? . . . It didn't make any difference to me.” By the time Michael would return from work, selling computer accessories, Sylvia had put the heater on and prepared hot food. “It's hard on him, having to work all day and come home and cook a meal. I'm on my own there and I'm cooking a meal for myself so one extra is no trouble.”

They’d sit together and eat. “Australian food, roast or grills, something like that.” Sylvia would accompany Michael to the bank and help him fill out forms. She’d reach for her dictionary when he asked about some word or other. “I know this situation with his sight and that and if I can do anything, I help him. And if I want anything done, he'll help me.”

It was in that flat alongside hers that Michael told an Iraqi friend he’d met in Melbourne after they arrived on the same bus from Woomera of a bold plan to use the play to communicate their plight to authorities. “Mohammad and I were here, late at night after 10 o'clock. I was telling him, we need to do something. We have done the play here at Trades Hall in Carlton, why can't we take it to Canberra?” When he first told me this, I misheard him. “Mostaheel (impossible!),” was his friend Mohammad al-Janabi’s response.

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This then is the story of an unlikely adventure at a time when time was already up on three-year visas for some and forced return seemed all the more likely after the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. “What do you think our chances are of being allowed to stay?” Mohammad al-Janabi once asked me. “I don’t know. You might have to prepare for the worst.”
It’s tempting to forget a time when people who came by boat seeking safety at last were instead detained indefinitely in remote camps. A time when some tried to hang themselves; some starved themselves in protest; some even sewed their lips together using needles and threads intended for mending clothes. A time when you remained marginalised even after release into the Australian community, kept marginal, denied basic access to language, uncertain if you would be sent back to danger or ever see your family again.

This is in part a story of what they endured. But it is not just that. Above all, it is about the challenge to welcome the stranger - a challenge we are denied when those who might be permitted to come among us are instead held on Pacific islands or otherwise kept from us. In part, this is the story of what happens when we are given a chance to get to know each other told at a time when the failure to do so denies us the chance to welcome the strangers. It is written with a conviction that the refusal to admit them is our loss too. This is not just a book about asylum seekers, activists, politicians and others. It’s about people. It’s about us.
CHAPTER TWO

Mohammad al-Janabi is blessed with a storyteller’s flair. When we’d meet on occasion, he’d invariably bring along a gift of sorts – an anecdote I might appreciate. He’d tell it last, as we prepared to leave. He’d watched an ant crawl up and down a wall 26 times outside a United Nations building and told himself he must persevere in his search for a home. I thought of this when reading of a 14th century Mongol warlord inspired in battle after watching an ant struggle up a wall again and again with a grain of rice. Mohammad told me of three dreams after his final Immigration Department interview to assess his case to stay in Australia. In the first, he washed floors at the department’s high-rise offices; in the second he received a blank sheet of white paper; and, in the last, a yellow envelope similar to ones the department sent intermittently since he was granted temporary protection in August 2000. The dreams came to him in a week in which a younger brother, Dafar, who’d been detained on the tiny island of Nauru, north east of Australia, returned to their public housing flat with a familiar-looking envelope. The letter, dated June 1, 2005, said: “As the holder of a subclass 866 visa you can remain indefinitely in Australia and have all the rights and responsibilities of other permanent residents in Australia.”

Mohammad was 41 at the time. He’d fled Iraq for Jordan in 1992 after Saddam’s regime executed one of his brothers. He was imprisoned in Turkey, forcibly repatriated to Iraq and spent six years in Iran until authorities threatened in 1999 to expel Iraqi refugees. He was among 284 on a small boat that reached Christmas Island from Java in early 2000. He and Michael had been friends since they left the detention centre. “I never saw him in Woomera but we were released on the same day,” Michael said. “We were on the bus together. I didn’t get to know him until we were in the flat in Collingwood. We lived there nearly two years. Then he applied for a one-bedroom. But until I got married (in 2007, the year he became a citizen) nearly every day or second day, I would see him.”

Mohammad’s older brother, Asad, went back to Baghdad after seeking asylum here. His younger brother, Dafar, would later run an inner suburban hairdressing salon in Smith Street, Collingwood. It was called Glory of Hair. Though we had not met previously, Dafar refused my $20 for a trim after I asked after Mohammad.

Mohammad studied to become a physiotherapist before fleeing to Jordan. He hoped to study so that his qualifications could be accredited in Australia. He told his story in Kan
Yama Kan (or as the play was known in Dari, Yeki Bood Yeki Nabood). He played the part of a stern detention centre guard, ordering the detainees about. His life had changed significantly since he gained permanent residence; “the doors” had opened wide to him. He’d marry Eman, the niece of a friend. They had two daughters – Nares or Daffodiland Tabarak. Nares was an infant when I attended a housewarming party in outer north west suburbia. I arrived early and, standing on the front lawn chatting to a group of men before the meal on a Sunday afternoon, it occurred to me I was the only one among them who had not come to Australia on a boat or been detained on arrival. Mohammad took his young family back to Baghdad some time after gaining citizenship in December 2007. They’d planned on staying for three months. But after just two weeks Mohammad was ready to go. “Let’s go back to Australia,” he told Eman. She wept at the thought of leaving so soon. Mohammad agreed to five weeks. “It’s hard. There is just a black future in Iraq.”

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One with a wary step, the other lanky with big, confident strides and a way of walking that makes it seem he is looking up over a crowd, Michael and Mohammad made their way from the outskirts of the city where the land dipped down into darkness from which the bright light of tall buildings shone through. It was late but she’d said to come anyway.

“Carmel, I need to talk to you,” Michael told the woman at the other end of the line.

“I’m sorry it’s this late.”

“Come over and have a cup of tea with us.”

Later that night, Michael told Carmel of a plan to take the play “to the heart of the politicians, the decision makers”. “And yes, this is where we started from, I guess.”

Carmel Davies’ accent betrays traces of the many she has encountered as an English language teacher who has used theatrical productions including Kan Yama Kan to teach new Australians for decades. She knew better than most about conditions at Woomera. She was determined to know what was going on. “I just didn’t feel that I could get into the play or write it properly or enter into the spirit of it without going there. When you are hearing stories that people are telling and they say how terrible Woomera was and the desert and the heat, it’s just an intellectual thing unless you experience it.”
So she took her young son Francesco and, with one of his friends, drove her bright red Toyota sedan more than 1250 kilometres along the Calder, National, Goyder, Barrier, National and Stuart Highways. She took the slightly longer inland route, via the northwest Victorian town of Mildura, reaching the outback South Australian town on a day in which temperature was up in the mid-30s and tensions high at the detention centre since the breakout just a week earlier. Carmel went to Woomera at a time of rioting, lip-sewing and hunger strikes. Some tried to poison themselves; some so desperate they drank shampoo. She took the two boys to the detention centre a week only after about 40 detainees escaped during Easter holiday protests, most only to be apprehended and deported.

Francesco and his friend were unnerved in the carpark at the sight of big car easing slowly their way. “I remember them jumping to the bottom of the car. They knew there had been riots the week before and there was high security and I think they saw this car circling and coming towards us. I remember them hiding and I thought, ‘maybe I have done the wrong thing taking children here. This may not be the place for kids’. But then I thought, ‘No. They have got to be part of this’.”

“What are you doing here?” a stranger in the car demanded. She had the name of a detainee she’d arranged to visit. It was Mohammad al-Janabi, as she recalled it, who provided the name of an Iranian man, a hairdresser.

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Michael and Mohammad were among 4100 asylum seekers detained at the South Australian camp in the three years to its closure in April 2003. Figures compiled by a group of lawyers acting on their behalf show the detainees collectively spent a total of 805,000 days in the remote South Australian camp outside a town 500 kilometres north-west of Adelaide that is emblematic of a system of mandatory detention in the only Western country to detain indefinitely until cases are resolved. Although almost nine in 10 held at Woomera were eventually able to prove their refugee status and were granted temporary protection visas, they spent an average of 182 days - nearly six months - in captivity.

The two friends were among more than 9500 people to arrive in Australia without visas from July 1999. Michael remembered a night flight from Darwin that took so many hours he could not believe on arrival at Woomera that he was still in Australia. Only the sight of the
national flag the next morning suggested this might be so. What first struck him about Woomera was not so much what confronted him as what did not.

“When we looked out from behind the fence, we saw nothing; just the dirt and a few dead trees. We were wishing we would see something - a helicopter, a car, a kangaroo, anything. We just wanted to see something different. But we saw nothing.” Woomera, named for an implement used by Aborigines to increase the distance a spear can be thrown, is a RAAF test range established with Britain in the ‘40s in a Cold War joint program in which the Blue Streak and other rockets were launched. The name has a very different connotation since the December 1999 opening of an “immigration, reception and processing centre” with 21 brick accommodation blocks to initially hold 400 people.

Mandatory detention of asylum seekers arriving by boat - then mostly Cambodians – was introduced in 1992 by the Keating Labor government. The Woomera centre was developed in response to a significant increase in unauthorised boat arrivals of Afghans, Iraqis and others, and the resulting strain on the capacity at the Port Hedland and Curtin centres. Woomera remained open for more than three years. Announcing in March 2003 the removal of the last detainee to the new Baxter detention centre, near Port Augusta, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock said that Woomera was to be “decommissioned for mothballing”. With a crackdown on people-smuggling and no unlawful arrivals since December 2001, numbers in detention had “fallen to the level where the Woomera facility is no longer needed”, he said.

Baxter would offer “a higher degree of amenity”, Ruddock said. “I’m not saying Woomera was not appropriate. Obviously we aim to treat people as humanely as we can.” Then ALP immigration spokeswoman Julia Gillard, citing incidents of self-harm, hunger strikes and detainees jumping on razor wire, described Woomera as “the public face of the worst of our detention system”. A group of lawyers who set up a base in the town of Woomera, found that the longest period of detention was 1106 days - more than three years.

Mohammad wore jeans, a light jumper and thongs when he set out for town on a winter’s morning in 2000 with others chanting that they wanted freedom. He hadn’t realised they would be spending two cold nights outdoors. No one thought to bring food. In the town, “a woman came out of her house just to look at us. Some people were waving their hats at us.”

The day he left, Mohammad held seven small stones in his clenched fist. Seven is
“traditional”, he’d explain. “It means you don’t want to come back to this place.” When the gates of Woomera detention centre opened on an August afternoon to release a busload of Melbourne-bound detainees, Mohammad hurled the stones he picked up moments before leaving the place where he was known only by the number DON2821.

Mohammad, who was on a boat that ferried 284 people from Java to Christmas Island, arrived in Woomera in February 2000 – the month in which John Howard, facing dwindling support, told Liberal backbenchers to hold their nerve on the GST. Mohammad was so overjoyed on learning he would be released on August 14, he kissed a female guard. “It was an unbelievable feeling,” he said. “Like you are dead and somebody gives you life.” Months on, it occurred to him that the constraints of his temporary visa meant he’d come “from a small jail to a bigger jail; that’s all”.

Michael and Mohammad were among 39 men and 12 women from Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Eritrea, Egypt, Somalia, Syria and Afghanistan interviewed for a June 2003 study by RMIT University’s Centre for Applied Social Research that found that delays in processing applications to remain in Australia were causing “immeasurable mental suffering and material disadvantage”.

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Carmel Davies told the guards at the entrance to the Woomera centre the name of the man she and the boys had come to visit. They seemed so tense, so cautious. One man had a bandage on his face. She wondered how he had sustained the injury. So many questions to be answered, so much detail to fill in. “I think we went in after lunch. We weren’t allowed to take much in. I think we took some letters. I brought some dates and Middle Eastern food that I thought this guy might like. A T-shirt…And while I was talking with him, the boys were hanging around and they saw these boys in the yard playing so they went out and played with them. My boys had a soccer ball. So they took it in and gave it to (them).”

The youngsters they played with would soon be in the news, surrendering to authorities after weeks on the run. Federal Police would take the Baktiyari brothers to Maribyrnong Detention Centre after they unsuccessfully sought asylum. “Both the kids were waving and screaming, and fighting to get out, trying to grapple over the men - at first, and then the guys would hold them back,” a photographer would tell a newspaper reporter. They would
miss seeing their father, Ali, returned to Sydney after an unsuccessful attempt to meet his sons who were sent back to Woomera, where they had been held for 18 months.

For now though, Alamdar and Muntazer kicked the ball around in a compound, between flimsy buildings that looked like mobile classrooms. Carmel remained in the detention centre with Francesco and his friend for a few hours. Then they were gone. The hairdresser?

“He got out and he went to Sydney. He had a sister overseas who I rang several times when I came back and he had to have a back operation I remember. He had slipped and fallen and had hurt his back. When he got out, I lost contact with him.”

Before returning to Melbourne, Carmel Davies stopped off to visit a Catholic priest about 80km north of Woomera and stayed overnight at his house. He knew people she’d wanted to talk to. “I wanted to write about the desert and the link with the Afghans and Aboriginals. That was the link that I was wanting to follow.” She thought about the Afghans in detention and Afghan cameleers who came to remote Australia a century or more earlier. “I saw lots of parallels between the original Afghans who may even have had relatives who were in the Woomera camp. I could see these connections. We met Aboriginal people with Afghan names and green eyes. We went to talk to them. I felt it was important to know that history which a lot of people didn’t really know much about.”

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“Dear Alamdar,” Francesco wrote to the older of the two Baktiyari brothers at the desolate camp in central Australia. “How are you and your family? I hope you are good. I am good. Today is my last day of school and then I have two weeks holidays. I have been watching the soccer World Cup and it is very good but my team Italy are out so I am upset. The final is (between) Brazil & Germany. I hope Brazil wins. I don’t like the German soccer team. I am playing soccer for a team as well and we have won every match.”

The letter from suburbia reached Woomera Detention Centre on July 19, 2002, weeks after more than 30 detainees escaped into the desert night. The Melbourne youngster was adjusting to his first year in high school. His favourite subjects were maths and social education. Others included English, science and art. He was going to an Australian Rules match the next day. “Have you seen it before? It is fun but ruff because you always have to push the other team.” At noon the next day, he’d be among a group of high school students
walking out of school to protest at Melbourne’s Maribyrnong detention centre. “I am going with my friends,” he wrote. “You might see it on TV.”

It was 10pm. Time to go to bed. He hoped Alamdar and his family would be given visas to stay Australia. He would come to visit him.

“PS. If you want you can write me a letter about you and what you like doing. ..

Your friend, Francesco”

The letter came back to Melbourne with a printed rectangle on the envelope featuring a hand with pointed forefinger and boxes indicating several reasons why it could not reach its destination. Someone had ticked the box that said, “Left Address”.

Davies wasn’t surprised when the letter to Alamdar came back unopened from Woomera. “I think that we had seen the boys on TV….and we weren’t sure if they got the letter. Obviously they hadn’t. They had left beforehand.”

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Carmel Davies had used theatrical productions to teach English to new Australians including members of the Hmong refugee community who fled Laos for Thailand before being resettled here. “There was quite a sizeable group (of Hmong) the high rise flats in Fitzroy during the 1990s. There were nine or 10 people in a three-bedroom flat. There were two clans, based there. They do this beautiful embroidery. They are called pre-literate. But they do these amazing bedspreads that are as big as those tables with diagrams, with very complex patterns. I don’t know how they do them without any tape measures. They embroidered them with little triangles, all put together without a ruffle, without a seam; all done by hand.”

The classes were a challenge. “It is very hard engaging people and working with language. It’s like drawing blood from a stone. It’s difficult finding what they need, what they want to talk about, what they want to write”. “What are we doing with them here in the classroom?” Davies would ask herself. “Are we just wasting their time?” Then she took a newspaper to class the day after a large proportion of the audience turned their backs on the Prime Minister John Howard as he spoke at a convention in Melbourne at which
delegates from around the country sought to achieve reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous people.

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The Prime Minister raised his right hand, bringing it down again and again, open-palmed at first then clenched, as he spoke “in the name of truth and in the name of a frank discussion”. The fist swept across the dark-suited chest, hovering above an ornate greenish tie. He held it there as he faced a dimly lit Melbourne convention centre. “Ladies and gentlemen, I believe that the plan that I have put forward...” The fist remained tightened above a white-shirted chest – wine red kerchief protruding from the breast pocket of his broad-lapelled suit.

But it was the audience’s response – not the PM’s performance – that made headlines the next day. “Turning away from an unhappy page in history”, the front page headline in the Melbourne broadsheet told readers the next day. “A moment likely to find its way into history books occurred at the Australian Reconciliation Convention yesterday when one quarter of the audience stood and turned their backs on the Prime Minister, Mr John Howard,” the newspaper reported on May 26, 1997. This was 30 years after a referendum in which Australians voted to count Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in the national population census and to give the Commonwealth power to make specific laws for Indigenous people.

The newspaper coverage had a big impact in a little class for recently arrived refugees from a small, landlocked country in Southeast Asia. Carmel Davies credits the response with inspiring her to initiate a theatre-based political project, the first of two that a few years later brought Michael and Mohammad to her door with a plan to take a travelling show all the way to the nation’s capital.

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“When I went into the classroom in Fitzroy, I showed them the photograph and I said, ‘This is the Prime Minister; these are the Aboriginal people’,” Davies recalled. “I had a picture of the 60,000 year timeline, a picture of land. Suddenly, the air was electric.” “That was what happened to us,” Davies remembered the response. “We lost our land. We were chased out of Thailand. We lived in camps. We had to swim across rivers.” The language teacher could
not have expected this flurry of English. “An avalanche of language came out as they related to this story. Suddenly there was a need to speak and the language came. Verbs. Nouns. It wasn't connected, but it came. It was something that they connected to really strongly.”

She’d been trying for months to get through. Now she could see a way to engage the refugees. Let them tell their own stories. She took them to see local productions that told of the migrant experience. But the level of the language was too advanced for her students. “There were people who were brought up here playing migrants in an English language classroom. The language was far too complex for them. They didn't get it. They'd never been to the theatre and probably never would engage artistically.”

Davies had undergone training in the approach of Augusto Boal, a Brazilian theatre director and politician, who founded a theatrical form used in radical education, known as Theatre of the Oppressed. “You go to a community, you see what is happening with them and what the issues are and you turn that into a play,” Davies explained when I went to see her at offices in the city of Adult Multicultural Education Services, an organisation which assisted with settlement since the end of World War II. “The play doesn’t have a resolution. You stop in the middle of the crisis. Then you ask the audience, ‘Ok, what would you do, if you were this father?’ ‘What would you do, if you were this mother?’ You turn it into a discussion and the audience comes in and takes a role.”

It was an approach she could use with refugees; not just the Hmong. She would feature as many nationalities as possible, finding common themes and weaving in the Aboriginal story of dispossession and loss. It did not prove as easy as she hoped. She would spend months trying to convince people at community centres to take part. Finally, she said, she “dragged people out of everywhere”.

The players were from countries including Bosnia, China, Eritrea, South Africa, Kurdistan, Afghanistan, Laos and Cuba. Without My Mother’s Hand’s name was inspired by a remark by one of the refugee women. It opened with an account by an indigenous man. “My great-great grandfather came from way up north in the Gulf of Queensland - a place called Ravenswood,” he would tell audiences. “His name was Gullumba. My great grandmother she came from the other side - a place called Georgetown. Yeah Georgetown that was the name they gave to my great-grandmother - Ethel Georgetown. They moved from up north way down south to a place called Cherbourg. That was an Aboriginal mission. But that's
what they called it but we called it Barrambah. They met and fell in love and had children. One of them was my grandmother. My grandfather came from Central Queensland a place called Quilpie, desert country. They brought him down to Cherbourg too.

“My mum and dad were both brought up on a mission. They called it home. But their real home, their ancestral home, was up north. That’s where their hearts belonged...The government said my parents were not responsible. Me and my two brothers were taken away. We lost our parents. We lost our family home...”

A media release for Without My Mother’s Hand credited Carmel Davies with “script, direction and (as) language coach”. “It’s not often that the stories of our youngest community are seen linked with the most ancient of our nation,” the release said. “...It’s also the story of Aboriginal Australia and the chilling similarities between the strangers from abroad and those who feel that they are strangers in their own country and finally the journey we all must make towards Reconciliation.”

Davies would spend part of each week teaching language at Fitzroy Learning Network, opposite the town hall building in Napier Street. Its director, Anne Horrigan-Dixon, offered her support. They applied for a grant for a second tour in November 2000. “Then we went on tour with it. Dandenong, Werribee, St Albans. We had 10 performances all over Melbourne. Some of the actors had jobs. The Bosnian couple were working in a cake shop. They got to every performance but they’d arrive one minute before curtains opened. Then the Cuban woman had a fight with her husband and turned up half way through a play and walked on stage and said, ‘I want to sing’.

“I really wanted a Hmong musician because they have these wonderful bamboo flutes that they play. I couldn’t find anyone because the clans had been fighting and half of them had gone to Queensland. I went to visit this little Hmong woman in her flat in Fitzroy to record her story. I’d spend hours and hours and hours getting people’s stories, because the language is difficult. I wanted them to feel that it was really what they want to say. I saw an instrument on the wall in the bedroom. Her husband played it. Would he like to be in play? Drag him along.”

As the first of the detainees made their way to Melbourne, a Hazara man from central Afghanistan joined the players onstage in Without My Mother’s Hand and, despite personal
tragedy and grief, went on to tell his story in the asylum seeker production that would come to be known as *Kan Yama Kan*. “I had been touring that for about a year and suddenly they all started arriving so I adapted it and stuck him in it,” Carmel Davies said. “I thought we need to hear this new voice from Woomera. So then it had another life.”

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A brass coffee set from Sarajevo; an ornate rug from Kurdistan; a bird cage from Shanghai. Players brought objects that reminded them of former homes. Their shadows moved across a backdrop of photographs onscreen. “Harrowing, moving and often hilarious,” said a promotional flyer for *Without My Mother’s Hand*. The players sat on chairs toward the rear of the stage. Each stepped forward when it was time to speak, with and without the help of interpreters.

A teacher from Eritrea, “loved my job and missed those sweet little children and their laughter”. Someone else remembered “my house in Havana Cuba my mother, my little son and every day we danced the Rumba...” Someone’s house in the Laos hill country was made of bamboo. It was large with five rooms. “I had a vegetable garden – tomatoes, eggplants, sugarcane. I had chickens, ducks and pigs.” A dapper man in blue polo neck jumper, grey jacket and trousers, cheerily wielded a red bird cage. “I had a little flat in Shanghai. Every night when I came home from work, my little birds, my little yellow canaries, would sing for me. I miss them so much.”

A woman from Sarajevo had a house “full of sunshine”. “In spring, the balcony was covered in flowers – pink, white and yellow. My mother would sit there and knit jumpers for the winter.” She fled to Slovenia while her husband was under house arrest in the city of Prijedor and held in a concentration camp near the village of Trnopolje from which images of emaciated inmates caused an international outcry that led to its closure. She’d remember the ease between Arif, the show’s lone Afghan – a young man from the persecuted Hazara minority grieving the loss of his two children after being forced to flee - and her daughters. “My kids were always with us. We didn't have anyone to leave them with. We were actors in the play. He always played with Azra, who was five, and Emina, who was seven... in his own language because our kids didn't speak English either.”
CHAPTER THREE

It was way, way past midnight. Carmel Davies persuaded a friend to come along. They stood silently in the harsh light as the lift carries them up, up to the 13th floor. Arif opened his door to them. He led them into the sparsely furnished commission flat where they saw sleeping pills and tablets for ulcers on a table. He curled up in the corner of a brown couch and hugged his knees. His daughters were dead. Carmel and her friend sat quietly with him. They sat with him for hours. What could they say to console him? He had no family here, no one to mourn with, no one to share precious memories of two little girls, no one to hold as he cried in his sleep. No-one.

“Mohammed, go back, go back and see your wife.”

“I can’t leave this country. If I do I can never come back.”

“You must see her.”

“All I can do is stay and work, send them money.”

He had been working as a tiler, sending part of his wages to relatives Afghanistan and Pakistan.

“My wife says, don’t think of the past. Your heart will be broken. Think of our future. One day we will be together....”

He feared otherwise. “I see no future. I am in a prison, a terrible prison. Your country is so large but for me it is a sad prison.”

Davies would take that lift up those 13 floors. “He was in agony. He would say, ‘I am dying today’.” She took a Buddhist monk up to see him; then a Brazilian doctor. “Anyone I could think that might make him feel a bit better, distract him or, give him some peace or whatever because I felt he wasn’t dying. He thought that he was and this distress was so palpable. I just took anyone I could find...”

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When I visited Arif at a big house he’s building in south east suburbia almost a decade on, I put it to him that I am concerned that I am causing him to revisit the painful past by interviewing him about this period. He seemed determined to proceed. At times the telling is harrowing. At such times, you feel you are drawing too close to raw hurt and want to pull
back. Afterwards, he invited me to stay for lunch. I had arranged to meet my elder son and declined the offer.

Arif had a small truck or ute parked outside and a royal blue Holden sedan, a prize possession at the time he’d driven it to Canberra in late 2003, Michael Aboujundi at his side in the passenger seat. The mailbox is an upturned plastic tub with a roof title on top. The house is a work in progress in a suburb where big dwellings crowd the properties. The Hazaras are hard-working people, he explains. He tells me about carpet he’s had made in Pakistan with letters in English expressing thanks to Australia. It was completed too late to take along on the Canberra trip and now hung on the wall at the Hazara Association head offices in the nearby south east suburban centre of Dandenong.

Arif may or may not have been released from Woomera on August 2 2000. He was not sure if this was in fact the date because he had forgotten much. Sometimes it is better not to remember, “because otherwise we cannot start again”. “If something is bothering you, the best way is to put behind whatever happened; just look at the future and be hopeful and try to establish yourself and your family in a new life here. That’s what I did.”

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Mohammed Arif Fayazi thought it bad luck that he was born with teeth in his mouth. Where he came from it meant a life of challenges. He was raised in a village called Jaghori in Ghazni province in central Afghanistan. His father was killed by the Taliban in an attack on a car in which he and two friends were travelling. He was smuggled across the border and arrived in Pakistan in October 1999. He was eventually reunited with his wife Zara and their son, Navid. Arif and Zara had another child and he appeared to be prospering. But such is the pain of some memories, I found myself apologising for the intrusiveness of my questions after he opened his door to me in sleeveless singlet on a hot Sunday morning years later at a home he was building in outer south east suburbia.

In a room to the left of the entrance hall he used as an office, he showed me a magazine published by a Hazara association he helped found. We drank green tea in glasses with small chocolates and toffees from a glass container. His eyes filled with tears at times. While we spoke, his Afghan-born son Navid entered the room with the Australian-born toddler, Nima.
Navid was just a little older than Nima when his twin sister and a teenage sister died “of disease brought on by famine and lack of appropriate medicine”.

Melbourne writer Arnold Zable has written eloquently of his Hazara friend: “During the dark times, between 2000 and 2006, when deportation threatened, I would sometimes accompany Arif as he walked the streets of Fitzroy at night,” Zable wrote in an article that appeared in *The Age* on October 25 2008. He sought to still his restlessness and despair. Now we walk together on Thomas Street, on solid ground, where his people have recreated the familiar ambience of the past.”

At a reunion at Arif’s house weeks after my visit, Zable told us about a rocket-shaped rock on which Arif carved the names of Zahra and the children as well as his parents during the long months in Woomera. “Mother, you are still in my heart,” he etched in the stone. “And when you looked at this rock you saw the whole story,” Zable said, “and it was heartbreaking and he became a part of our lives.”

Arif had dared to speak out where others held back. “They were on temporary protection visas and it was a genuine fear but Arif was fearless.”

Zable reminisced about an exchange as they left an event at Melbourne Town Hall. “It was about 2005, I forget exactly, and it looked really hopeless and that was the first time that I felt that I didn't know what to say because we kept on saying, ‘It's going to change. You are going to get there.’ But there came a point when we felt like liars and I didn't know what to say to Arif. And he turned around and he said, ‘It's all right Arnold. It's all right. We know that you guys are doing your best.’ So he ended up being the one comforting me.”

A few years earlier, they were on their way to an annual fund-raising ball hosted by the network when Arif turned to a musician friend who was deeply distressed. “She was really hurting and Arif put his arm around her and gave her comfort and said a few words. She just said, ‘You have lifted me out of my own sadness.’ This was at the hardest time. This was when we were beginning to think, are we telling lies when we kept on saying you've got to keep on having hope? We can forget the fact that there was a time it looked like we weren't going to break through and we kept saying to Arif, ‘Hope. Hope.’ And then along comes (the friend) and she's hurting and he puts his arm around her. So it was a two-way thing. He gave us comfort.”
Arif spoke fondly of Zable that night. “There is something I will never forget. When I was sad and deeply distressed he was a writer and a storyteller and I didn't know if he just wanted my story. But what I found in him was that he didn't just want my story. He wanted my friendship and we have become great friends.”

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**Thirty nine months to curtain-up.** Someone was knocking. A woman with reddish blond hair opened the door at Fitzroy Learning Network to a question. “You won't teach us English, will you?” Years since that spring morning Anne Horrigan-Dixon still thinks about the tentative approach and the words the young man used. He was asking a question but he knew the answer – or thought he did.

He was expecting to be turned away. She was not yet sure why.

Others on the footpath watched as the young man went up the red concrete steps to the door that opened to a shock of light from an inner courtyard that morning in August 2000.

“There were five of us behind him,” one of the men, Arif recalled.

Another settled in New Zealand three years later. Though the Federal Government granted him temporary protection, it rejected claims by his wife, daughter and brother and refused to allow them to settle in Australia. Ali Sarwari was just 31 when he was killed in a car crash north of Auckland in early 2006. His 11 year-old son joined the family there months earlier.

Mohammed Arif had by then finally been given permission to remain in Australia after a long and frustrating delay in processing his application for asylum. He was able to fly to New Zealand to comfort the Sarwari family and help arrange for the body to be flown back home for burial. “I didn't want to have to do this but finally I was able to do something.”

Arif - sturdy with a generous head of hair brushed back and, despite his troubles, an air of confidence – watched from a short distance as Jafar Yawari, the young man they had urged to speak on their behalf, turned from the woman who opened the door to him and said in their language, “hey, this is the place”.

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They’d come. She thought they might. “It wasn't a surprise.” Horrigan-Dixon, then director of the Fitzroy Learning Network, had expected the newcomers to end up in the nearby
housing commission flats, and come knocking at its door. “We had heard on the radio that they had released these people from immigration detention. I think they had brought 200 people into Victoria, taken them to a centre in Preston and processed them. They were given $200, signed up for Medicare, given bank accounts and put into flats. It had been reported on the news.”

Horrigan-Dixon recalled how she and an English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) teacher wept hearing how the first Afghan asylum seekers to reach Melbourne from the detention centre in South Australia’s Simpson Desert had been harassed at a city hostel. “We were just ashamed,” said Horrigan-Dixon who welcomed the strangers into the centre opposite the town hall where she was coordinating classes for Vietnamese refugees and the Hmong community from Laos, among others. “I had heard it on AM and had been crying. I said, I’ve heard this dreadful story on the radio, and she said, ‘I heard the same thing.’

“The next day Jafar knocked at the door. So we had a context. We knew who this group of people might be.”

By the time I wrote a report that appeared in The Sunday Age on August 18 2002, two years had passed since Horrigan-Dixon opened the door of the former St Joseph’s kindergarten, where a stone in the red-brick was laid by Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Madden on September 16, 1913, six months after the future capital, Canberra, the players’ destination decades on, was officially named.

Horrigan-Dixon’s response to the young man’s request for language classes ushered in a frantic period in which she and a team of staff and volunteers had by then made “an Australian home” for more than 300 people seeking refuge. “A haven for asylum seekers with nowhere to turn,” the headline said.

A colleague wrote a piece that ran prominently in the Sunday paper on December 23, 2001. Boyish despite his 20 years in the accompanying photograph, Jafar sat on a bulky bed, wearing a striped t-shirt, neat trousers and running shoes on feet that dangled above the floor. He had a book open on his left thigh, with a few others stacked beside him in the Housing Commission flat he shared with two other men.

Eight brothers and a sister had dispersed after the Taliban reached his home. “You understand, it’s very painful,” he told Marino.
Melissa Marino wrote that Jafar was just 17 when he’d left Afghanistan. He’d crossed the Pakistan border hidden in the back of a truck, was flown to Indonesia and was among 152 who spent eight days at sea on a tiny boat, “with nothing but biscuits, rice and water”.

According to the report, he knew no English when arrested in Darwin. “He thought the authorities were Taliban,” Marino wrote. “He had never even heard of Australia.” He had some education: the Koran, Persian poetry and “very basic” maths. A solicitor advised him to study. On his release after eight and-a-half months in Woomera detention centre, he’d enrolled at Collingwood College and studied maths, IT, and other courses, passing his VCE with a score of 62.

“I need to pass because I have no other choice,” he said at the time. Jafar worked for a Melbourne furniture restorer and kitchen hand at a local Afghan restaurant. He hoped to raise the $16,000 or so a year he needed to study IT.

Marino interviewed Jafar again a few months later. The story appeared on February 3, 2002. “It looks a bit like a dream,” Jafar told her, this time interviewed at the 34th floor Collins Street offices of a bio-genetics company executive.

With the support of new friends at the network, he enrolled at RMIT to study computer science. He’d moved into a self-contained flat at the St Kilda home of a couple who had read of his plight.

When I spoke to him years later, he remembered that the first English word he remembered hearing during his eight and-a-half months in Woomera was “bugger”.

He knew more of the language than some of his fellow detainees by the time Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock announced in mid-2000 that 1700 asylum seekers would be released from detention centres in a six-week period. The first 17, mostly young, single, Afghan men arrived in Melbourne from Woomera on Friday July 14, 2000.

Jafar and his companions came to Melbourne soon afterwards. The bus took them across the land to an inner suburban church hall days earlier. If the young man imagined he had some grasp of the language, he soon had his doubts. People spoke quickly. It was difficult to keep up. “Without the English language, you can't survive in Australia,” he said. “This is the first thing that we had to do; to learn the language; to understand how things work in Australia.”
Language classes helped break the monotony of the long months behind the wire at Woomera. “But that was the beginning,” Jafar said. “When you come to the real world it’s very different.”

Days after reaching Melbourne, he’d passed a sign on Napier Street offering free English classes. He told his companions they should try there. Each had been politely turned away elsewhere. “Ineligible,” was the word invariably used by people he’d approached to request language classes after documents issued on release from detention were perused and telephone calls made. They could read the expression on the faces and knew they were not welcome.

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It was an all too familiar predicament. Ahmad Raza once boarded with Heather Stock, a retired schoolteacher and learning network volunteer who described her role in the Kan Yama Kan Canberra visit as “basically kind of a fetcher and carrier”. “I showed my visa,” he recalled an unsuccessful visit to a language centre. “The lady could not understand what it was. She said it was the first time she’d seen something like this. The visa was just like cardboard. Your picture was stapled on it and there was a stamp. She said, your visa doesn’t say that you can work or learn English in Australia. I said, ‘no, no, we can.’ So she rang and said, ‘you can’t’. If you wanted to study at that time it cost $5 per hour for English.”

Ahmad Raza married while visiting relatives in Quetta, near the Afghan border in Pakistan, and returned with his wife. They were living in a unit on a busy road north of Melbourne when I went to see him months after moving out of a terrace house in Fitzroy. He was in his early 30s, his hair close-cropped, wearing a yellow t-shirt and shorts. There was a sense of lightness about him despite the odds he’d braved. He found work with the ANZ Bank, advising customers who were struggling with loan repayments.

He treated me to a fudge-like delicacy, tea and hours of talk which continued by candlelight after lights went out in a power failure on a hot summer’s night. News had broken that 56 Sri Lankan asylum seekers had disembarked from the customs ship Oceanic Viking and entered an Australian-funded detention centre on Bintan Island, Indonesia. “If someone hasn’t been through a process or a situation, you might feel sympathy but you can’t feel it,” he told me when I asked if those of us who had not shared such an experience could
understand the Sri Lankans’ predicament. “You can't understand the depth of those problems.”

Then he added: “I will tell you that two of my brothers were forced to clear landmine-area without professional gear, and you will say, I am terribly sorry for that, but you cannot feel it.”

Ahmad Raza fled Ghazni, where the family ran a general store, because families with large number of young men were required to join Taliban. He later heard young people were “forced to walk on landmines as the first line of attack on the enemy”. His father was arrested after offering a bribe to free them. The younger of the two brothers was badly bashed, his hands broken, when he argued and fought against being taken. When his father was released they fled together by car with another man to Kandahar. His father urged him to travel on. “He said, you have to go to Pakistan. This guy will help you. We are coming afterwards.”

Ahmad hid in the boot of a car crossing the border into Pakistan where he was issued with a false passport. He’d hoped to stay among the Hazara community in Quetta waiting for the rest of his family but was told his father wanted him to go on ahead and that it was “very difficult to get documents for every single person at once. So we do it, one by one. So now it is your turn.” He once asked about payment for his escape. “When I got out and got the contact number for my father, I asked him, how much did you pay? He said, I did not pay anything in cash. What I paid was the jewellery that we had at home.”

He gestured in his Melbourne flat. “Can you see those porcelain bowls. Blue bowls. We had a big set of those. That was part of my grandmother’s dowry. It’s Russian, more than a hundred years old. He said, he gave a whole set of this with the jewellery - silver and gold and some gemstones that belonged to my grandmother, which my mother used to wear as the eldest bride of the family. My father gave all the stuff.” His father closed the shop and sold the clothing, shoes, beans and sacks of flour, sugar, rice and lentils to pay for the rest of the family's flight. “But they did not follow me. They just left by themselves because the person who took all the money just disappeared...”

He was taken by plane from Karachi to Jakarta. After a fortnight or so in a hotel with other fugitives, about 200 went in a convoy of buses taken to a port – he had no idea where - but
had to hurriedly turn back after a police raid. “There was a guy who could speak English and Arabic and Persian and Indonesian fluently. So he had three mobile phones in his hand. He solved the problem. So the buses turned back.”

They tried again. This time, the buses ventured out in the night with headlights off. People on the boat shone torches to direct them. As he took his place, he glanced at his watch. It was two o’clock in the morning.

“We were sitting like this.” He crouched with knees to his chest. “It was full of people sitting here, here, here. Everyone was sitting like this. There was no space to move. If you wanted to stretch, you would stand up for a few minutes and then sit again in the same spot. I did not eat anything. I thought I would have to go to the toilet and someone would take my place. There was a captain and two crew-members. They were cooking rice. We could smell it.”

Hours into the journey, he finally stood to stretch. “It was like a bowl of water, a big bowl, and we were just a tiny thing in the middle.” He gestured with his right thumb and forefinger. “I was thinking that if something happened to this boat, no one will ever know. For the first time I got really scared.”

Others were praying, reciting from the Koran. “Sometimes I think, there are times in your life when you find yourself in a situation - this I believe - you have to stand up and just face it. And that's it.”

He learned about Indonesia at school but knew relatively little about Australia. “When we were in the middle of the ocean, a crew member came up and said, ‘when we reach Australia…’ It was the first time ever heard about that we are going to Australia.” He thought he had reason for optimism. “I became very happy, to be honest, because I had seen these documentaries from time to time in Afghanistan in which someone is rescuing a bird on a cliff and these guys are going to the bottom of the sea and saving a fish and sea animals and I thought, ‘we are going to be in good hands’. But that was very quickly shattered, and I was very, very disappointed.”

He showed me a small, compact book by the 14th century Persian poet, Hafez. He brought it with him from home in Afghanistan. Hafez wrote poems to console Jacob after Joseph was sold into captivity. Ahmad had it with him on the cramped boat that had ferried him with
197 people to Christmas Island. He spoke fondly of a man he called “Mr Tom” employed by the Immigration Department to provide English lessons to detainees at Woomera. “He was a really nice man, and he was very passionate about teaching. He came for one month or two and then a riot broke out and they asked him not to go because he might get killed.” “Mr Tom” gave him a Persian-English dictionary from which he set out to memorise five new words a day. He was working his way from the start of the dictionary until a security officer advised him of the problem with his approach. “He said, you are going very well… but every letter has hundreds of words so you will get stuck in one letter.” Instead, the officer counselled, he might want to learn words starting with A, B, C and D one day and E,F,G and H the next. “I’d never thought of, that.”

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Jafar played down his role in making contact with Anne Horrigan-Dixon. Maybe someone else in the small group knocked at the door, he said. “I am given a lot of credit but there were a lot of other people who were better than me”. But he spoke with affection for the woman who welcomed him into the nondescript red-brick building that “worked for me like a door to this brand-new world”. “She acted like a mother. That’s the best way I can describe it.”

Jafar and his friends on the footpath were released from detention after their right to asylum was upheld in terms of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and a 1967 Protocol. Australia was a signatory to each of these. They fled their countries “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion…”

But they soon found that unlike “offshore” refugees, given permanent visas often after years in refugee camps, they were subject to an arrangement aimed at discouraging others from coming here without permission - three-year visas at the end of which their status would again be considered. Until October 1999 all refugees were entitled to permanent visa protection. Though eligible for income support, they could not access resettlement services including 510 hours of federally-funded English language tuition available to other refugees, bring their families to Australia or return here if they left this country.
Some would find their claim to their own languages undermined by authorities. A Canberra-based academic who then chaired the Refugee Council of Australia told me in late 2002 that contradictory language analysis reports cited in a Federal Court immigration case called into question “shonky” tests used by then to help decide the fate of more than 3000 asylum seekers in Australia. Professor William Maley said the case, in which a report from one European language service used by the Immigration Department said the man was “obviously” an Afghan and a report from another said he was “certainly” from Pakistan, revealed a “lack of firm, methodological basis”.

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They were only the latest to find that language was being used to discourage outsiders. Among the best known cases involved Egon Erwin Kisch, the Prague-born socialist who broke his right leg after leaping more than five metres from the SS Strathaird at Station Pier on November 13, 1934, to defy a ban on entering Australia. “In many ways, Kisch was the first boat person,” Dr Heidi Zogbaum, a research fellow in history at La Trobe University, and author of *Kisch in Australia. The Untold Story* (Scribe 2004) once told me.

Though Kisch did not intend to remain in Australia, the government used the dictation test introduced in 1901 to try to prevent a left-wing Czech writer from landing in Australia. But they could not stop Kisch, who came at a time when immigration assistance schemes were halted by the Great Depression. He arrived in hard times that remained vivid for those who remembered empty stomachs, queues of people in dyed ex-army tunics waiting for sustenance (“susso”) tickets, the smell from soup kitchens, bloodying confrontations with landlords’ representatives and police.

This was a time of scarcity and resilience. A time of rabbit traps, chooks in the backyard, mushrooms and blackberries gathered for food. People wandered from town to town in search of work. Some paid to live in others’ work sheds or slept in stationary trains. It was a time when you might open your backdoor to someone even more desperate than yourself; someone knocking at the door for an odd job, or something to eat.

Kisch has become an iconic figure whose visit epitomised the virtue of defiance of authority in grim times. He’d been sent to Australia as a delegate of an organisation called Movement Against War and Fascism. He had a valid visa and planned to stay for just two months. But
the conservative Lyons Government stopped him disembarking in Fremantle. “Kisch came with one message, which was, watch Hitler,” Dr Zogbaum said. A large crowd awaiting him at Melbourne’s Station Pier had mostly dispersed when he leapt from the ship as it prepared to sail to Sydney.

Kisch was identified in the Australian press as “the jumper”, she writes, “and often signed autographs with ‘jumper’ as his profession”.

He was arrested after leaping ashore, and returned to the ship. Kisch spoke several European languages but refused to co-operate when police in Sydney conducted a dictation test, then used under the Immigration Act, in Scottish Gaelic.

Dr Zogbaum said the then newly appointed attorney-general and Commonwealth legal adviser, Robert Menzies, was humiliated in the High Court and in Parliament over the Kisch affair. The visiting writer went on to speak to big crowds throughout Australia and returned home at the Government’s expense. He lived in exile in Mexico during World War II, and died in Prague in 1948. “The language test never recovered from this ridicule,” said Dr Zogbaum, whose book features extracts from a book by Kisch called Australian Landfall.

If there ever was any doubt that command of the English language was integral to acceptance as an Australian it was once and for all dispelled in April 2017 when Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, urging migrants to embrace “Australian values”, announced changes to citizenship laws including a more stringent English language test. The Prime Minister told ABC TV journalist Leigh Sales that most Australians were pleased that his government was standing up for Australian values and supported the initiative. “They know that it’s good for people who are applying to be an Australian citizen to be able to speak and read and write English. They know that’s a good thing.”

Sales asked if there was not a risk of missing out on the likes of Czech-born business leader and philanthropist Frank Lowy, who knew little English when he came to Australia as a refugee after World War II. what if they’re like Frank Lowy, they’re working madly to try to get up a deli, running a business in western Sydney, working all sorts of crazy hours, they might not have time to go to English language classes.
Turnbull responded that “to take on ... that additional honour, that additional privilege of being an Australian citizen, it is perfectly fair, and it’s in their interest to have a competent level of English.”

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August 2000. Volunteers from a church group were among those to welcome them when the bus from Woomera arrived in the early morning. Arif thought it might have been at a child care centre. Perhaps it was in the suburb of Preston. They were treated to lunch and given old clothes and shoes. Members of the church group took them to temporary housing. They were told they could remain there for three months. They were given sheets, some cutlery. The view from a flat way up in a housing commission high-rise in Fitzroy in which he now found himself with four others was exhilarating after months in detention.

When Jafar Yawari dropped in to say hello days later, Arif and his flatmates quickly realised this fellow Hazara could speak English better than them. It was Jafar who explained why they were being turned away at the time from TAFE (Technical and Further Education), Adult Multicultural Education Services or Migrant Resource Centres. “We went everywhere and it was ‘no’, ‘no’, ‘no’”. ‘You’re not eligible’. I didn’t know what the word meant until Jafar told me they are not going to teach you because of your visa.”

A volunteer interpreter earlier accompanied them to a nearby shopping centre and brought them back to the flat. Without him they couldn’t find their way. “Even though it was five minutes away to walk we were lost.” Jafar Yawari mentioned that he had seen a sign offering language classes. They would have walked right past without being able to read it. Perhaps they should try there. “Even though Fitzroy Learning Network was two minutes away we didn’t know about the classes until someone who could read and write English came and joined us. When we passed the place he said let’s ask at this place. Maybe this is the one.”

Bring your friends, Anne Horrigan-Dixon told them after tea and biscuits. “The next day he knocked on the door, all these men stood around the bottom of the stairs in a circle with exercise books and pens, looking really nervous,” Horrigan-Dixon recalled, “because they expected to be rejected again.”
The night after Anne Horrigan-Dixon opened the door to them, they spread the word.

“Everyone had Optus Mobile with free time from 7 pm to the morning,” Arif remembered the excitement. “We started phoning everybody and said we had found a place to teach us English. And we said they are very friendly people and very, very helpful. No one had a car at the time. The next day the five of us and a bunch of others from Glen Waverley, Dandenong and Springvale all turned up. Fitzroy Learning was crowded at that time. The teacher didn't know what to do and everybody was happy. What we saw was a laugh, you know, the smile on the face.”

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Soon Arif was telling his story onstage in a new production telling stories of people who had come seeking refuge by boat only to find themselves behind wire. “In Afghanistan in my mountain village Jaghori every day was a holiday in winter because it was so cold. One metre of snow. We walked around in our village, talked with friends, had dried salty lamb for lunch. The children were playing with snowballs - so lovely.”

There were other memories to break the spell. “When the Taliban took over in Afghanistan the civil war began,” he’d say in a language he’d quickly grasped. “They killed many thousand Hazara people because we are a different tribe, different religion. When they attacked my village, I escaped to the mountain with all the men, leaving my wife and baby twins behind. They wanted to kill me, so I ran in to Pakistan. The smugglers hid me in a truck. They organised a passport. I flew to Indonesia at midnight. They took us to a small boat. There was a storm for six days and six nights on the ocean. The captain was lost. He was crying. Everybody was crying. We have no food, just one bottle of water. On day 10 the Australian navy found us. It was 26 January 2000...”

He was hoisted high into a helicopter off the Australian coastline on a day when some Australians were celebrating European settlement, others marking their survival.

Days later, the Immigration Minister Ruddock announced 73 asylum seekers who reached Christmas Island the previous months had been sent back to China. Theirs was among 129 boats bringing 2245 people to Australia. Crew members would face up to 20 years in jail and up to $220 000 in fines.
While others were dancing to the beat of an Afghan band on a grey Sunday afternoon at Fitzroy Learning Network, I watched Arif hoist a 15-month-old boy born in detention and hold him up high to touch a purple balloon. It was a spontaneous moment by a man not yet reunited with his wife and remaining child in a week in which the High Court upheld the Federal Government's right to detain failed asylum seekers indefinitely. Many at the party with temporary protection had no idea if they would be allowed to remain in Australia. Some had left behind families at risk. They did not know where they were or whether they would ever see them again.

Arif held the toddler high. Would he ever hold his own son so? I thought of shared hopes and fears among about 150 refugees and supporters there that day.
CHAPTER FOUR

Arif, Mohammad and Usama, as he was then, would stand together onstage in a play that told their stories. They were still in detention in the South Australian desert in June 2000 when one of the first people to reach Melbourne on a three-year “protection” visa told an interpreter in Arabic of his frustration after we had spoken for an hour or more one night. Aimer A. had something else he wanted to say. He looked wearily past me, as if the last chance was slipping away. Just over a week after his release, he spoke animatedly of his experiences in detention at the centre at Port Hedland, in Western Australia’s Pilbara region, opened in the early 1990s to hold Indo-Chinese refugees.

“Before I left, my friends were hoping I was going to tell everything,” the man who brought me here translated from Arabic. “They asked me, ‘Please. Let the people know about our problem’. And now I haven’t said one per cent; nothing.”

He let the hands that expressed his anguish drop.

The 20-year-old Iraqi student who the previous year fled home in the holy city of Najaf, 160 kilometres south of Baghdad, knew little English and I only enough Arabic to say “Salaam” to the small group of men with whom we sat sipping sweet cordial and tea.

The role of interpreters in the assessment of asylum seekers was called into question in the early 2000s, when some claimed those feigning an Afghan identity sometimes confused words in the Pakistani language, Urdu, with Pashtun. I had no reason to doubt the man who had brought me to see Aimer A. But it’s never easy trying to communicate through an intermediary.

I met Aimer A. one night in a house in Melbourne's northern suburbs where, as I wrote at the time, you leave your shoes at the door and walk with respect. The man who arranged the encounter spent four years in a Saudi refugee camp before reaching Australia in the mid-1990s. The man who brought me here told me his own family was required to pay the cost of the bullet used to execute his father. “Every one of us has a long journey of suffering before we arrive in Australia,” he said. Aimer A. worried about perceptions in the Australian community “that considers us criminals when they don’t know about our stories, our background, why we are here”. He said he lost 20 kilograms in weight and suffered hardship in Port Hedland since being apprehended in mid-1999 with a group of 80 voyagers
on a boat trip for which he paid $3500. For 10 months, he languished in captivity in remote Australia. He was among 11 released from Port Hedland weeks earlier. He clung to a diminishing hope to study medicine. His schooling was cut short in Iraq “because his father's opposition to the government was known”.

The day we met, he'd visited a special language school but said he was politely told his visa did not enable him to study there.

Earlier that month, he witnessed one of a series of breakouts involving more than 650 people, first from Woomera, then Port Hedland and Curtin detention centres. “I wasn't one of the people who broke the fence but I was one of the people who were watching.”

He worked from 7am to 8pm in a canteen at Port Hedland. A $10 phone card was his payment for a day's cleaning and other work. It was difficult to get access to a telephone and three months passed before his family learned where he was. He was flown via Perth, Adelaide and Melbourne to Hobart, where he was given $200 plus $130 social security. Aimer A. made his way to Melbourne days earlier to join acquaintances. He spoke of atrocious conditions under the supervision of ex-prison officers. He told me detainees who demanded improvements risked solitary confinement. Some went on a five-day hunger strike in protest over changes in legislation late the previous year they believed would prolong their captivity. But “no one came and asked us what we want”. These were just a few of many grievances, he said. He was among a total of 69 asylum seekers from centres in Western Australia and South Australia released into the community on three-year visas.

He'd since heard that his mother, two sisters and two brothers fled his birthplace, a city in which a mosque contains the tomb of the founder of the Shi'ites, to join his father, a religious teacher, in Iran. There was no question of a return to Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

“They are facing death in Iraq,” said Haider Aljuboory, a slightly built man then in his early 30s who worked as a volunteer with the Iraqi Association in Melbourne, organised the meeting and translated. The Iraqi community here had limited resources. Its members showed Aimer A. how to bank, use public transport, seek rental accommodation and look for a job. But it could do little more for him. Haider Aljuboory told me then that through its support of the Allied bombardment of Iraq in the Gulf War and sanctions, Australia was partly responsible for the predicament of those forced to flee. Iraqis sought sanctuary in
Canada, the United States, Sweden and Britain. He corresponded with friends by e-mail and was convinced conditions were worst in Australian detention centres.

Aimer A. crossed the Syrian border the previous year, was flown to Malaysia and Indonesia, where he met compatriots who told him of a ship headed for Australia from Surabaya via Bima. By the fourth day, they began to despair. “We lost hope and we started praying. Some of the people started crying and saying this is the end of our life,” he said. Early on the fifth day, they saw birds. By about 11am, an aircraft appeared. “We started screaming. I was carrying kids just to show them we needed help.” The plane flew off but returned within half an hour. Within an hour, a naval boat approached. “When we saw the plane and the boat the hope came back again. We became very happy.”

But not for long. “I had an image or an idea about Australia ...” The older man translated: “He had thought it was like a land of dreaming. But it’s a big disappointment.”

The encounter troubled me. Aimer A. had remarked quietly at the end of the interview that despite his promise to others in the Port Hedland centre, he hadn’t said “one per cent; nothing.” Just a few months earlier, a book in which I’d explored the question of personal culpability in the apartheid-era South Africa of my youth was published. I told myself as I sat in a newsroom in the heart of metropolitan Australia almost 20 years after I migrated here, I didn’t want to be looking back in a decade or so worrying over the way I squandered the privileged role as journalist to tell what I could of what Aimer A. and others endured.

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Eden. Hepburn Springs. Port Fairy. Anne Horrigan-Dixon hung pictures of favoured destinations in her office upstairs in the two-storey, red-brick building. “I try to put up happy and engaging photos of nice places in Australia, and I say to people: ‘One day you’ll go there’.” The former high school science teacher was the facilitator. She made stories happen. But she knew not to place herself at the centre. She was not one to be profiled. You can see her back and reddish hair in a welcoming hug in a photograph by Sandy Scheltema on the cover of Age journalist Michael Gordon’s 2005 book, Freeing Ali. But it’s a glimpse. The focus is clearly the face of the young man partly obscured by her warm embrace. We see his eyes and know that he is moved. We do not need to see her.
Horrigan-Dixon received the medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in the 2017 Australia Day honours recognising decades of work for refugees. She was named the City of Yarra’s Citizen of the Year months before she left the organisation in 2005. Her role was celebrated that year by Melbourne author and illustrator, Martine Murray, who based a character on her in the children’s book, The Slightly Bruised Glory of Cedar B. Hartley. “You can tell instantly that she’s the main one; she’s the boss, though she seems more like the head of a family,” the narrator says of the fictional centre director, Eliza. “She’s standing, large and smiling, all bosom and blonde curls, a sheet of paper in one hand, the other hand waving around, leading her attention from one thing to another: from Maude, a small neat woman in a green suit, who manages the office and is trying to fix up someone’s dentist appointment; and then to the man who has come to fix the leak upstairs; and then back to Maude, who has someone on the phone who can’t speak English well; and then to a young man with dark hair who appears to have no idea what’s going on. She gathers him close, and gives him a huge grin and says to us (we’re loitering in the hall, apparently waiting for her attention to fall on us), ‘Oh, Tirese, this is Farid. He’s from Afghanistan. We’re his new family...’”

Word spread and people arrived with suitcases and nowhere to go. Most were strangers to each other from several troubled countries. They soon bonded. “You saw the best in human nature,” Horrigan-Dixon said of the camaraderie between asylum seekers. “They were willing to share their nothing with everybody else.”

Staff and volunteers brought camping gear, linen and blankets from home and stocked cleaning equipment for use in the nearby high-rise Housing Commission flats. Horrigan-Dixon would wake to find TV sets, beds, mattresses and other items left on her veranda in response to an e-mail appeal. She quickly became adept at writing career resumes and talking to prospective employers. She ensured that tradesmen took relevant skill-related tests at TAFE. The network bought work boots, overalls and tools.

They learnt to prepare food that adhered to Islamic dietary requirements. They organised a “mini Olympic Games” with volleyball, rounders and an egg-and-spoon race; even held a national contest of rice dishes. Anything to lift the spirits of men, women and children haunted by past traumas, loss of families and uncertain futures.
“We would have chocolate biscuits or cream cakes or stupid hats . . . just to stop people thinking,” Horrigan-Dixon said. One woman’s closest friend drowned with her husband and five children on the way to Australia. Others had relatives on the Tampa. An Iraqi man left a son in detention in Port Hedland to return to a sick wife in Iran.

The network struggled to meet increased demands of the many who came to it for assistance, with annual funds of $90,000 from the State Government and $40,000 from the City of Yarra. Network staff ignored their own well-being to such an extent that several succumbed to stress-related illness. Horrigan-Dixon lost her sense of taste, suffered weight loss, eczema and asthma. “The doctor said ‘you need to take time off’, and I said to him, ‘How can I walk away?’” She believed was certain that many were appalled at the treatment of the refugees. “People’d come and hug me and they’d cry. I barely know people and they say, ‘I just can’t believe that it’s happening in our country’.”

I was impressed by her action in not just opening the door to the strangers but committing herself to improving their lives regardless of the personal cost. Though the circumstances were very different, it seemed a heroic kindness that put me in mind of an elderly woman I’d interviewed in east suburban Melbourne who with her late husband, put themselves and her family, at risk of execution by the Gestapo for harbouring five Jews for three years of Nazi occupation of Holland. Though neither Horrigan-Dixon nor her family were put at risk, her unambiguous response to the challenge reminded me of Dutch migrant Nell van Ranglerooy’s when I asked in the late 1980s whether she looked back on her action decades earlier as bravery or “just a sense of doing what had to be done”. “We started it really because we reckoned that people needed help,” Van Ranglerooy, then in her mid-70s, replied. “There was no way out for them.”

I have thought of Ekaterina Danova, just 11 when her mother thrust her from the edge of a mass grave into a stranger’s arms during the Nazi massacre of 10,000 Jews in Simferopol, Ukraine. When we met, she remembered “a wild cry behind me”, rough abuse and clattering footsteps as a woman in the crowd ran with her up a street to a house in a courtyard, hurriedly slamming the door of a cupboard that would be her hiding place in daylight hours for the next two and-a-half years. Her parents were among 20 relatives killed by the Nazis that day in December 1941. But for her mother’s desperate action and the heroism of the woman who saved her, she too would almost certainly be dead.
I think of Auschwitz survivor Kitia Altman’s caution on good and evil in an earlier interview: “None of us should be complacent and say: 'I would never do it.' We don't know. Intelligent, educated, compassionate people did it. So how do we know which way we would jump.”

How would you or I have behaved had another’s child been flung into your arms or mine, as Danova was by her desperate mother? Would I have risked all and run, to shelter that child? Or stepped back, just a little, and hoped somebody else would step in. It seems to me I might well have walked home after witnessing the killing that day, wishing the child had not come in my direction and reassuring myself that surely there was no way I could put my family at risk for a stranger. Perhaps not.

It might seem misleading to mention Anne Horrigan-Dixon in the same breath. But I wondered if this was not the same spirit that might in other circumstances have enabled one person to risk all to save another. I wondered when I first heard of Jafar’s knock at the door what I might have done if I was there at the time. Might I not have been just another of those who, after carefully perusing a cardboard document, made a call to check procedure and, smiling sympathetically or not, told them that they were unfortunately not eligible?

“I immediately feel ashamed of my very small and self-centred life in front of Eliza,” Martine Murray’s narrator says of Eva, a fictional Horrigan-Dixon, “who has in one blow revealed herself to me as some huge-hearted, masterful conductor of this international orchestra of other peoples’ needs. But at the same time I can tell she doesn’t care how small my world or anyone’s world is. She grins at me, just as she grins at anyone, and puts her hand gently on my shoulder.”

When I telephoned Anne Horrigan-Dixon to arrange to meet, she’d first asked about my health. She worried that I didn’t seem to realise the risks of sleepless nights, or take them seriously enough. What made her open the door that day? Simply this: she’d thought of the mothers who farewelled their children not knowing where they would end up. Surely they would want to know there was someone there to welcome them in a strange place. She was thinking not just of the young men, women and children who came to her but their mothers, faraway.
It seemed at times Anne Horrigan-Dixon was determined to hold a fractured world together. She spoke of the vicious attack sustained while working for Victorian Labor Upper House MP Barry Pullen. “I was very severely assaulted in 1992 in my workplace. I was almost killed. I believed that I was going to die. A guy who had been allowed to go off his medication had a psychotic episode. So I had severe post-trauma stress disorder.”

It was this attack, she believed, that enabled her to empathise with people detained after fleeing trauma in their own countries and risking their lives in uncertain boat travel. “Then they get released into the community, thinking that everything is going to be great after they get out. All of a sudden, their dream of freedom has gone because they realise there will be no family reunion, they can't learn English, and they are on limited Centrelink benefits ... for a minimum of three years. That almost killed people.”

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While visiting Beijing once, Horrigan-Dixon sent me an SMS: “You must talk to Richard Wynne.” “We've known each other now for 20 years, maybe more,” the State planning minister told me when I visited him at his electoral offices in Smith Street, in inner suburban Collingwood. He remembered the attack when they were working together for Upper House member Barry Pullen in the 1980s. “It was a shocking thing really. It was dreadful assault even though she was not physically, badly injured. She and I have talked about that since. It's now come back in the traumatised form for her. I think it has various diagnoses like post-traumatic stress, all of it fully understandable.”

Wynne spoke of camaraderie and shared purpose. “I think in some respects my relationship with Anne has been (to) both of our enduring benefits because we have taken on some tough issues together, particularly around the asylum seekers. When I was working for Barry and she was at the learning network, we had this community turn up that no one had heard of, the Hmong community. No one had a clue who they were. They basically turned up at the housing estate. She came to see me and said, ‘we've got these people. We've got to do something for them’. We got people organised and put together a support structure for those people and they have gone on to do extraordinary things, that community.
“The next people who turned up were the Hazaras and other people fleeing persecution and, again, these were groups of people who while they weren't stateless, there was nothing for them. There was no housing, no access to health services, no Medicare, no public transport, no education, nothing. I mean quite literally people turning up with the clothes on their back and a suitcase. No sense of settlement; no sense of passing people onto a support structure.”

The state Labor politician laughed remembering the day Horrigan-Dixon “bowled in the door”.

“You've got to help. We've got to do something.”

“And we did. We did. There was only one response. We had done it before with the Hmong. The basic things were beds and blankets and sheets and somewhere to live. We stepped in a whole range of ways. It was absolutely fundamental that we got them housed in the high-rises. Essentially they were housed on the basis of need. There's a couple of urban myths that we took over flats and stuff but that's not quite true. The State intervened by saying, if you won’t provide health services we will. So we got them access to community health services in our local community health centres. We got them access to education if they came with children into the local schools. Any costs were covered by the state. Every three or four weeks I would go to the Minister for Transport and say, ‘we need more transport tickets’. So we’d get another bunch of tickets and to Anne or to Kon (Karapanagiotidis) down at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. We essentially put in place all of the things that a civilised society ought to put in place for these people. The Federal Government frankly didn’t care.”

How significant was the opening of the door to Jafar Yawari and his friends that morning in nearby Napier Street? “I firmly believe it was a pivotal turning point in the way that people in this community understood the plight of the most impoverished refugee communities and it turned the debate. People said, ‘we are not going to put up with this’. Any time we went and asked for things people just said, of course. I can't remember how much money I got. I was getting money out of bizarre places in government. I would just go frankly and
basically beg for support. I was about as creative as you’d hope to be. Fifty thousand dollars here and $100,000 there because they were overwhelmed, completely overwhelmed. It was not state government business but we did it. We did it.”

The youngest of a wharf labourer’s nine children, raised in near poverty, he marvelled at the Canberra trip - the way in which Horrigan-Dixon had managed to “pull off the logistics and to get access”. “I think it is due to the sheer force of who she is that she brings people with her and you are forced to listen and to acknowledge.”

He attended performances of *Kan Yama Kan* on several occasions and remembered it as a “stunning and powerful, evocative moving story”.

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Among those who worked closely with her at the network, Scott Thornton had been here for a few years when the first TPV holders arrived, first as a volunteer then full-time worker on part-time pay attending to the finances and office administrative work. He had the demeanour of a fondly remembered school master you might encounter years after attending his classes. With neat moustache and quiet eyes behind thick glass, he’d been the constant at the network, attending to business in a shared office to the right of the entrance foyer when others ventured out with a travelling theatrical production. If he did get about, it was to attend to immediate needs. “I was rushing around making sure they had sufficient supplies for them to take. Borrowing the car and going off to buy the Halal meat and ice, and things like that. Someone always had to stay behind to look after the place.”

Scott Thornton remembered the day the young Hazara man came knocking at the door and was ushered in with his friends. “I rode up to the supermarket and brought a couple of bags of biscuits...Just plain biscuits; a few packs to make them feel welcome.”

As he noted, Fitzroy Learning Network was “just a little neighbourhood house” when “suddenly all these young men came in...”

“Bear in mind,” he’d say, prefacing an observation.
Thornton died in Canberra in July 27 2014 weeks after moving there to start a new life in retirement. He was 70. In an obituary in *The Age* I co-wrote with Arnold Zable, Michael Aboujundi said Scott was “the father figure, the friend, the colleague. He was always behind the scenes, the friendly person who would ask would if you would like a cup of tea or coffee? He would walk out with you to the yard and talk to you about anything...”

Scott Thornton had worked in reinsurance - spreading the risk between insurance companies, he explained – and came down from Sydney a few years earlier to join his wife, Margaret, then chair of La Trobe University’s Law Faculty. To an outsider happening on the centre, he brought an air of quiet caution. He spoke quietly about quiet things that mattered to an organisation stretched financially as it struggled to cope with the demands of TPV holders. “Anne at the time had no financial experience. Our basic funding was for English classes and we had support from Yarra City Council as a neighbourhood house. The public came on board and started to give us donations. But obviously we couldn't spend more than we had. We did apply for deductible gift recipient status and had to show that we were helping the homeless and the people who were destitute. It took some time to work through the process.”

Scott remembered public antagonism. “The initial reaction from some people was that they were just queue jumpers. But after a while, it started to sink in that you don't queue up at the Australian embassy in Afghanistan or Iraq or Iran to apply for a visa. It took a while for some other stories to start coming out about how people had seen members of their families killed in front of their eyes and how they had to flee. In some respects it is very similar to the Hmong story or those who fled the Vietcong after the fall of Vietnam.”

The welcome here was never just about language – though that was a key to it. It was about helping people make their way in life. It would prove to be a big undertaking, against the odds, from the outset.

“At that time we were quite a lot smaller. We did not have a full-time admin worker. We did not have a need for full-time refugee support worker. So really it was Anne Horrigan-Dixon as the coordinator enlisting the help of some of the teachers to help these men find jobs. This involved helping with their CVs and getting them into training: courses like forklift driving and things like that.
“It was chaos, seven days a week”.

It seemed now to have been a frantic blur. “Bear in mind that everything was like a kaleidoscope over the next week or so because people were coming and going. They didn’t have much in the way of clothing and bedding and things like that. I remember Anne ringing people up, and within days, we had bags of blankets and sheets and pots and pans arriving. We rang around and soon had volunteers sorting them out…”

He had a slight brogue, a trace of childhood in Edinburgh. His family came to Australia on a six-week voyage in 1956 on a P & O liner from the English port city of Southampton in a scheme whose participants would be famously nicknamed Ten Pound Poms. “When we arrived, we were treated as equals. There were no barriers in our way. This is the story of probably the majority of Australians.”

From Sydney, they went to Newcastle. “My father ended up working for BHP, which had a big steel factory. The migrants were shifted to where there was a demand for labour. Originally, we thought we were coming to Melbourne but BHP said, we need more workers in Newcastle. So the best of the whole ship load ended up there.

“We ended up in a migrant hostel, two to a room. All meals were prepared for us. The children went to school. Every night you’d put in your lunch order into the canteen, and you’d go down to breakfast, then collect your brown paper bag with sandwiches, fruit and a piece of cake.”

Promotional films promised a beach lifestyle, abundant food and space, all the more enticing in the bleak post-War UK. He was third eldest of five children, his father a labourer. Edinburgh was “dark and gloomy” in comparison. “I remember the ration cards, as a child. Long after the Second World War, four of us had one bedroom.”

What had he heard of Australia? “The sunshine; the beaches; everyone had a bicycle and every family a car. This was the publicity from the Department of Immigration.”

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Anne Horrigan-Dixon knew the value of community, the longing for some sense of your place in the context of kin. An only child, she would later piece together the bits of her own life, seeking out traces of her heritage. Her search for family connections took her to the
New Zealand south island port of Timaru, where she visited the graves of the grandparents of her toolmaker father, James McCormack Horrigan. She has been to Adelaide to search shipping records she couldn’t access online. “They all came from a radius of 20 km from Tipperary in Ireland. The countryside is very, very beautiful. I went to all the little villages and churches, and I felt incredibly comfortable in Ireland because of my Irish Catholic upbringing. I felt very much at home.”

The Afghan refugees reminded her of single Irish men who came before them, leaving their families behind. “That’s the way that immigration has always happened. But the tragedy of it all is that sometimes families never get reconnected.” She spoke of a great sense of loss, all the more so for families who had no written histories. “These poor illiterate Irish migrants who came here, you can find no record of them anywhere, because they didn’t read or write in English, and they were completely lost in the system...” Then there were Chinese men who came out during the Gold Rush unable to bring their families with them. The White Australia Policy kept families apart from Federation. “There were all these lone men ... They had assumed that they would be able to bring their families here. But they weren’t allowed to bring them.”

Horrigan-Dixon traces her forbears on her mother’s side to a convict from the village of Shotesham south of Norwich, transported to Tasmania in 1838 and “one of the first thousand people to settle in Victoria”. Richard Chapman suffered a brain injury after being thrown from his horse and died two years after he “ended up being the 18th person in the first lunatic asylum opened in Victoria”. She has visited the birthplace of her maternal great-grandmother, the village Cronebeg in County Wicklow, south of Dublin, “the most beautiful place”, scene of clashes with British troops in the 1798 uprisings.

Her mother, Marge, worked for a Polish Jewish couple at a haberdashery stall in the Geelong market and later lived in Lygon Street, Carlton, while running a store in Flinders Lane in Melbourne in which they sold haberdashery and Manchester. “They used to supply shops in the country and all the big country towns. The family’s surname was Rose. The lady's name was Bashla Rose. She had two boys, Harry and Sam. Sam became a famous medical researcher, who was involved in the development of the polio vaccine. Harry was a real estate agent. My mother worked with them till 1952, when I was born.”
Horrigan-Dixon’s mother lived in Lygon Street, Carlton, in the 1930s, where she immersed herself in the Jewish community and spoke fluent Yiddish. She later went to work for a family called Gotlib, Holocaust survivors from the Polish city of Bielystok. “She had been in a concentration camp. Mr Gotlib was from a very very wealthy industrial family, and somebody from the factory hid him in the back of a pig sty for the whole of the war. My mother worked with them till she was 70. “So my mother was a person who had the dual personality – the Irish Catholic family she came from and, on the other side, she was totally immersed in this Jewish community because she spoke Yiddish.”

The Gotlibs ran a factory called Alida of Rome Exclusive Italian Knitwear in partnership with an Italian couple. “They knitted suits and jumpers, sort of couturiered garments like you would get in Italy. They had all these Italian ladies and they had hand knitting machines. They’d manufacture the garments on very, very fine yarn, not much thicker than a piece of cotton. These were all Italian ladies, and it was a real artform. Nobody else did it in Melbourne.

“We lived in Mt Waverley… I went to school at the Catholic convent Kildara on the corner of High Street and Glenferrie Road, opposite the Malvern town hall. I’d catch a tram to where my mother worked, stay there and, when she finished work at five o’clock, catch the train and tram back to Mt Waverley. So every afternoon, I was in the Italian factory. All these Jewish people were coming in to have their clothes fitted. At the end of the year there would be this huge party. They’d bring in a big tableload of Italian panettone. All of the children would come in. People would be given gold jewellery. It would all come in from Italy. This was part of my upbringing.”

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Scott Thornton contrasted the experience of asylum seekers he came to know with his own comfortable voyage to Australia. “Because my sister was a baby, we were on the top deck of the liner. My mom and dad had a private bathroom and the steward would come in and give us a cup of tea in bed every morning. There were three full-course lunches and dinners and refreshments during the day. So when we arrived at the migrant hostel in Mayfield it was a bit of a letdown.”
He laughed at the memory. “It was late in the evening. There was a hot meal waiting for us. The refugees, when they came out of Woomera were given a bus ticket to Melbourne. They did not have hot meals waiting for them when they arrived”.

These were challenging times at Fitzroy Learning Network and they took a toll. “We were not equipped to deal with this sudden influx of people with problems and as a result, some people did get burnt out. We had a few staff members - three as far as I am aware - who ended up with stress-related problems because we were under-equipped to deal with these problems. We had very little government backing.

“Luckily, we were able to tap into medical centres and dental clinics to help with refugees. So there was a whole network willing to open the back door to give free help. Imagine having a tooth ache for months and months and not being able to access dental health, because you’re not eligible and had absolutely no money. The same with eye problems…”

The newcomers were desperate for work. “A lot of the young men came to classes for a short period of time. But once their level of English was quite reasonable there was an overwhelming desire to find jobs; that was the critical part as far as they were concerned. They were allowed to work and they had a special allowance from Centrelink, but they were on a temporary protection visa which didn’t allow them concession cards on public transport or things like that.”

The TPV holders faced challenges unlike refugees previously welcomed at the centre. The Hmong came here for English classes and to learn skills that would help them cope in the Australian community. “The majority who came here were women with young children. They had been accepted as permanent residents, and they were on Centrelink and child support benefits etc. So there was no demand on us to supply necessary goods, bedding, clothing, help with jobs and so on.”

The TPV holders lived with uncertainty. “These people had this hanging over their heads for a long, long time. They had trouble sleeping. They had all types of illnesses. They thought there’d be a knock on the door, one day, and they’d be put on a plane and sent back. Some were so-called encouraged to go back. “

After the fall of the Taliban, the Howard Government offered Afghan asylum seekers a “reintegration” package that included a payment of $2000 per individual and $10,000 per
family to return home. Relatively few of 3648 temporary visa holders and others in detention took up the offer to go back. “They’ve moved into the real world. They’ve got their families here. Obviously they still drop in occasionally. One of them, an elderly gentleman, has decided he wants to improve his English. So he has come back here for English classes. He is an Afghan. One of the Iraqi refugees is my hairdresser.”
CHAPTER FIVE

Alice Garner was nervous. She didn’t know what to expect as she and her daughter, Olive, approached the tall steel fence razor wired across the top at the end of a short road close to the Highpoint West shopping centre. She imagined scenes of distress, people telling terrible stories of flight from their homelands. How would she deal with this? It was late 2001 and she and Olive were fronting up for the first time at Maribyrnong Detention Centre, the former migrant hostel just a few kilometres west of Melbourne’s CBD. They would be back again, and again. She’d press a button, look up at a camera and wait to be let through one gate, then another. She’d press another button outside the door to the main building and wait for the guards to let her in. In the reception area, she’d fill out a form with her name, address and names of up to four people she’d come to visit. The guards remained behind glass. She’d show them her photo ID. They wouldn’t let you pass if you couldn’t show a passport or driver’s licence. If she wanted to give something to the people she was visiting, she’d have to leave it with the guards. They’d give it to detainees after she had left. They’d give her a key to a locker in which to put her things and plastic strip around her wrist. They’d put a wrist band on Olive too.

Weeks earlier the Howard government was returned with an increased majority in a Federal election win attributed in part to the popularity of its hardline approach to asylum seekers. Around this time, detainees at Woomera set alight to female toilet and washing facilities and damaged others including recreation rooms and a kindergarten.

Actor, musician and historian, Garner won a Film Critics Circle award for best supporting actress in director Emma-Kate Croghan’s 1996 romantic comedy, Love and Other Catastrophes. Daughter of writer Helen Garner and actor and writer, Bill Garner, she grew up in shared households surrounded, she has written*, “by grown-ups trying to make a living as artists”. She was just seven when she and some friends staged a play in the Pram Factory’s back theatre. They called it And I’ll hold my breath until I turn blue. Just 11, she acted in an early 1980s movie adaption of Her mother’s classic novel, Monkey Grip. It was on the strength of that performance that Belgian director Jean-Pierre Mignon offered her a role at 17 as Anya in Chekhov’s The Cherry Orchard. Rehearsals were held on the top floor of the Temperance Hall, in Napier Street. She’d remember Mignon pacing the room, “frowning and putting, occasionally roaring, whipping me and a bunch of crazy, affectionate, brilliant
older actors into shape”. A “mad Russian actor” in the cast commended her to his Melbourne agent. She acted in the Anthill Theatre’s *Three Sisters, Summer of the Seventeenth Doll, Imaginary Invalid*, short films and TV roles. But something was missing. She was never as passionate as others about acting. “When I saw other actors bawling their eyes out during dress rehearsals, and vomiting in the toilet on opening night, I felt ashamed by my own lack of nerves.”

Garner was moved to activism after watching an ABC TV Four Corners program in which she learned of the plight of a traumatised six year-old Iranian asylum seeker, Shayan Badraie, who stopped eating, drinking and speaking after witnessing hunger strikes, rioting and attempted suicide by detainees at Woomera and in Sydney’s Villawood detention centre. “That episode motivated so many people to get involved.” “Olive would have been a year and-a-bit. I had just finished my PhD in French history at Melbourne University. I think it was one of those situations where having finished a big job, my mind was open and I could see this thing and I realised it was something that I felt that I couldn’t live with. I hadn't been aware of asylum seekers up to that point. I think I’d just been absorbed in everything else going on in my life. When I saw that episode I was so deeply shocked and I think I had that sense too that this was a child.”

What if Olive had suffered thus? Mother and daughter would pass a metal detector and another two security doors before entering the detention centre visiting area. The first time she and Olive went, they met four men. They men were friendly, some shy but happy to receive visitors. She’d feared distressing stories. But it seemed then that they did not want to talk about their experiences; simply to enjoy the company of visitors, to chat. She was relieved. She could simply be there as a friend. They didn’t expect some kind of counsellor or lawyer, for which she wasn’t qualified; just a friend.

She’d take Olive with her because the men she saw missed their children, nieces and nephews, younger sisters and brothers. They loved to play with her, to give her little things.

“No! please don’t give her anything, you have nothing,” she’d tell the detainees.

But they insisted. It occurred to her then that the giving made them feel they had some control over their lives. It was not easy to be take gifts from visitors. They want to return
the favour. It was difficult for them to show hospitality, when they are living in what was essentially a prison. Still, they managed somehow to act like hosts.

She met an elderly Afghan man whose children came from east suburban Doncaster each day to bring him home-cooked food. He spoke no English. Olive played with his grandson. He offered Garner and her daughter pistacchios and almonds.

Each time they’d leave, the people they had come to see would accompany mother and daughter to the exit. They’d hold both her hands and nod and say goodbye.

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Garner went along to a meeting of the group, Refugee Action Collective. “Four Corners had an online forum straight after the show and I got onto it and I found out that there were organisations around that were trying to be active in this area”. The refugee collective planned a bus trip to Woomera. Though tempted, she had a baby and wouldn’t be going along. It wasn’t that long since she had acted on SeaChange. She rang a few actor friends. Maybe they could help get some publicity. Kate Atkinson who played the policewoman, Karen, was immediately interested. They went to a meeting at Trades Hall but decided they could be more effective if they started their own group. They’d heard about a fund-raising concert for asylum seekers at Melbourne Town Hall. They arrived late to find it was full. A stranger approached as they stood in the foyer.

“What are you doing here?”

Garner can’t remember if someone introduced them or if the woman came over because she recognised her from the late 1990s television series, SeaChange, starring Sigrid Thornton as corporate lawyer who leaves the city to take a job as a magistrate in a coastal town where she once holidayed, decided to be part of the show. Among them, Tom Long, known for his roles in films including Two Hands and The Dish, played the court clerk, Angus, in the series; and Garner a character called Carmen Blake.

“We’ve started a group called Actors for Refugees.”

They’d set up the group in September 2001 “to influence public opinion, to encourage people to reconsider their response to the turning away of the Tampa asylum seekers (and many more since then), to the detention on our soil of asylum seekers, including children, to
the absurd and expensive deal made with the government of Nauru, which cannot manage its own tiny nation, let alone hundreds of traumatised refugees…”

“Well I've got a job for you.”

Garner laughs remembering her first encounter with Horrigan-Dixon, “a ball of energy just sort of emanating”.

Garner, Atkinson, Long and their fellow actor Diana Greentree joined the Without My Mother’s Hand cast after another performer withdrew. “We just had supporting roles. But having done that, we established a relationship with Anne and others at the centre when they started to work on the idea of doing Kan Yama Kan. It ended up really being one of the most amazing experiences I've had has an actor.”

Rehearsals and workshops were as much about socialising as theatre. This wasn’t just another cast and she wasn’t just another player. “I began to realise that my role was about being there to support everybody else even though we had a bit of acting to do. It was about enabling people who often have never stood on stage before to say stuff in public about their experiences.”

The Mother’s Hand players gained in confidence in the company of the actors. “They had these cameo roles,” Davies recalled, “and via their names suddenly everyone wanted to come and see this simple little play”. The show opened in tiny La Mama, the independent theatre in Faraday Street, Carlton, that nurtured playwrights, actors, musicians, filmmakers, poets, comedians and others since the 1960s. Jack Hibberd, David Williamson, Barry Dickins, Graeme Blundell are among the names associated with La Mama. Now it was hosting a group of players, some familiar to audiences, but most of whom could barely speak English.

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The Mother’s Hand season ended. Carmel Davies sat down with Horrigan-Dixon in her office at the Napier Street building. They spoke of the need for another production. This time it would focus entirely on the stories of the newest arrivals from Central Asia and the Middle East now living uncertainly on temporary visas. In the learning network funding application for the tentatively titled Scars on the Soul, they wrote that the arrival of so-called “boat
people” generated one of the most intense dramas in Australia at the time. It unleashed racial, religious and cultural prejudice, intensified fears of “foreigners”, impacted on relations with Indonesia and Pacific neighbours. It had led to redrawn national borders and raised international questions about Australia's human rights record. The children overboard issue, the applicants wrote, “contains the capacity to bring down a government”.

The new work would “personalise what is generally de-personalised in the media...” The performance would tell the story of homelands, reasons for flight, journeys to Australia, interactions with people smugglers, incarceration and lives since the release from detention.

There would be two professional actors – eventually three, Alice Garner, Lisa Maza and Majid Shokor - and musicians from different ethnic backgrounds as well as up to 15 “TPV actors”. Players from Actors for Refugees would each take a “cameo role”. Singer-songwriter Kavisha Mazzella would be musical director, performing with a community choir and a Kurdish musician, Dursan Acar. The show would feature poems, stories, dance, songs and other forms from the different cultures and would be in both the languages of the refugees and English. They proposed three six-week periods from March 2002 in which they would conduct research, writing workshops and rehearse. This would be followed by performances over a fortnight that July and at least four weeks in which they would tour schools. They would research the stories of people who worked at detention centres, the crew from navy boats patrolling Australia's north-western shores and Aboriginal people who were forced off their land at Woomera.

“The performance will have to engage at some points in a sympathetic and imaginative manner with Islamic concerns and strictures relating to performance,” the applicants concluded. “The asylum seekers have no public voice. There are very few performances on Islamic/Muslim issues in the mainstream or otherwise. This is a unique opportunity to tell their stories.”

For Without Mother’s Hand, Carmel Davies had spent months collecting stories and workshopping with refugees from countries as far afield as Laos, Bosnia, Kurdistan, China, Eritrea, South Africa and, towards the end, Afghanistan. It was billed as “a simple and powerful testimonial”. She’d directed the show and taken it on the road. It succeeded in reaching far more people than she expected. But what she now had in mind was even more
ambitious. So she turned to a director friend, Robin Laurie, who had worked with the East Timorese and other communities.

Laurie had in turn invited the writer and storyteller, Arnold Zable, to take part. “I have a really strong belief in the power of particular sorts of poetry,” she said of the skills he brought to the project. “I think because you are doing something that is art and it has to have a heightened sensibility of some kind. I call it mytho-poesis and Arnold’s work has that quality. That’s also why I called it Kan Yama Kan, Once Upon a Time - a great and timeless story of mythic power to be told and re-told.”

Then she laughed as though fearing she might sound pretentious. “The script is an unfolding, evolving thing too. I put all the bits together.”

Davies and Zable were co-writers with Lebanon-born author and actor Ramez Tabit, playwright Johann McIntyre and Iraqi Aoham Al Dujayli, who told her story from behind a screen on a pressed metal frame because some thought it improper for Iraqi women to perform onstage. Arif was soon a part of it. “His apartment was always full of young men coming in,” Davies recalled. “He was a mover and shaker for them all. He was also very articulate. Very quickly he was speaking at public meetings and he would really inspire people in the audience and move people and he had a very good grasp very quickly of the emotional power of language.”

They needed others. “We are looking for people with Temporary Protection Visas who are willing to publicly perform their stories,” said a flyer. “We will run workshops twice a week for 10 weeks to teach people skills and confidence to perform publicly and to create the performance. We will explore many different ways of telling stories including songs, poems and movement. You will get the opportunity to practice English speaking, to meet other people and to have fun.”

There were early difficulties. As an ESL teacher, Davies had no illusions about the inevitable challenge of telling stories in English. She worried about others’ expectations. “There was a bit of conflict, because people couldn’t do the pieces that they wrote…It wasn’t their voice. People couldn’t learn those huge chunks of language. They could only work with so much. They were all traumatised. My idea was to have their voice, what they said, not much more. They could say it with passion, meaning and conviction. It was what they wanted to say. It
wasn’t me twisting it into something. I based little scenes around what I had done in this play (Mother’s Hand), using only their language.”

The players sat through clamorous, overcrowded classes. Another ESL teacher at the network at the time would later recall lessons through troubled times. “It was extraordinary to be teaching at the start of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq and September 11. To have students from those countries in the classroom and ...looking at your own country going in as a force to those places where students come from. It was huge. I’ll never ever forget it.”

Helen Hanrahan’s students learned their lessons despite “a huge disorientation, on top of all the emotional experiences”.

Some had been jailed, shot at or seen others shot; lost family members. She remembered “a great sense of people just pulling together emotionally, sharing that load to make it bearable”. Some news was just too confronting for the classroom. “I tried to actually not use it as part of teaching material. But they knew and we knew what was going on.”

By opening night at Trades Hall nearly two years had passed since Jafar Yawari knocked at the door. By the time they went onstage on opening night the Kan Yama Kan players seemed to have mastered enough English to express themselves. But it is easy to underestimate the challenge and the role of the network in Napier Street where, long after a Labor government scrapped temporary protection visas in August 2008, a sign welcoming strangers with a smiling woman’s face still announced: “Asylum seekers and temporary protection visa holders free”.

At the start of each performance, Robin Laurie would make it known that only three in the large cast were actors. “It has taken a lot of courage for them to perform in this play,” she’d say in on onstage preamble to each performance. “They come from countries where speaking out can have dire consequences. They are bearing witness to their experience in a language with both a different alphabet and one that is written in the opposite direction from their languages. We the director, co-writers, fellow actors, musicians and singers of Kan Yama Kan are honoured by their presence and we ask you the audience, to join us in thanking our cast for their courage, their many hours of workshopping and rehearsal and to welcome them, not only to Australia, but to the Australian stage.”
Glancing at notes on a clipboard, she told the opening night audience *Kan Yama Kan* was “driven by one overwhelming passion”, to present the human face of asylum seekers and refugees. Then, welcoming the players, she turned to face them with a broad smile and confident sweep of the right hand. As the production’s director and dramaturg, Laurie’s task was to “look at the conceptual structure; a bit like an editor...” Laurie was a founding member of Circus Oz, alternating as MC, acrobat, comedian, trombone player and a character in a comedy duo called Joni Spagoni whose partner Alfonso was “known as the human hoist from Benalla”. She had had various roles including the bride in the first performance at La Mama of playwright Jack Hibberd’s *Dimboola*. She has attributed the ethos of the innovative circus without animals to the influence of the pioneering Australian Performing Group at the Pram Factory in Drummond Street, Carlton.

“I came out of those 1970s performance traditions that wanted to break down the walls of the theatre and take performances out to people. I also felt that performance and the arts had a responsibility to society and I wanted to engage in a really direct way with audiences.”

Laurie had worked on community theatre projects, rarely starting with a pre-existing script. She researched, directed and created performances with the East Timorese, Italian, Filipino, Northern Territory Warlpiri and other communities. “I knew Carmel because I’d done a series of large shows with FILEF and the Italian community in Sydney during the ‘80s based on many different topics. The initial one was the story of Italian migration to Australia after World War II. Another was *L’Albero delle Rose*, about the lives of three generations of women. The performances were done in English, Italian and dialect. I decided not to translate everything, which I continued to do in all this work. Carmel had seen those Italian shows.”

She worked on *Without My Mother’s Hand* with Carmel Davies who recruited her for *Kan Yama Kan*. “When Carmel asked me to work on it I had a very grandiose thought. I thought everything I’ve done in my life has brought me to this point. I took this as the most important thing I’d ever done in my life. So I brought all my skills, all my experience, all my understanding - from my past 30 or so years’ work - and I took it really seriously and I worked harder than I had ever worked on anything.”

Years on, she was still moved by the experience. “It was an enormous struggle and there were moments in that process when I doubted it would happen.”
For the players, each performance could evoke troubling memories. A performer would drift off into memories during the performance and forget his cue. Some comment or reminiscence had him thinking back. People would cry in rehearsals.

It was not just the asylum seekers. Others involved in the production, including members of a large choir, sought counselling to help with the distress. “Look, we were engaging with people who was through terrible traumas…I read books on depression and how to deal with people who was through trauma. I took all of that extremely seriously.”

She’d not lost sight of the importance and power of humour to generate resilience against the odds. “People have to laugh sometimes in the face of terrible things or they die. So there are quite a lot of funny stories in here.”

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There was dark humour in the questioning by an inept TV journalist played by Lisa Maza. Reflecting perceptions of perceived “queue jumping”, she asked Iraqi Mohammad al-Janabi, who fled to Turkey after his brother was executed by security police and has detailed a circuitous journey that would culminate in a boat trip with 284 people from Java to Christmas Island in February 2000 and a stint in Woomera.

“Well did you find a queue there I mean Imran Khan, Jemima, the cricket?” Maza’s caricature TV journalist asked al-Janabi, who has described a bus trip to Pakistan after several failed attempts at flight, forced return to Iraq and six months imprisonment in Iran.

“T Went to the UN office. The interpreter said, ‘are you a general’? I said, ‘no I’m a simple man. He said, ‘Hah, don’t waste your time. No-one’s been accepted for the past three or four years. So I went to Turkmanistan. I had no papers, nothing. At dawn a truck full of soldiers got me. I cried, ‘Take me to the UN’.

“Good so they drove you to the UN office to make your application?”

“No! They hit me. One karate-kicked me in the chest, poof! I thought I was dead. Then 10 days blindfolded in a tiny cell. After that they took me to the Iran border and said, don’t come back.”

“You must have been very frustrated by now.”

“I decided to go back to Turkey...”
“You could have better luck this time. You could get an early appointment.”

“I travelled with 13 people across the mountains. We got lost, then, boom, I was on my back covered in blood. It was a landmine. Three friends died. The army sent us back to Iran. In 1999 the Iranian government said, ‘All Iraqis out!’ I flew to Indonesia.”

“Well there is an embassy in Jakarta, Mohammad…”

“In Jakarta people, even with refugee status, wait for years; no country will take them. So I decided to take a boat to Australia…

“So now everything is fine and you can stay.”

“Not exactly. I only have a temporary visa. I have three years then I must go and join another queue.”

“Well, good luck and thank you Mr, ah....”

“Mohammad.”

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Majid Shokor welcomed us. Alice Garner joined him. “Welcome,” she gestured, arms outstretched. “Have you eaten? Are you comfortable?” Before each performance, Laurie had the players offer audiences tea and sweet pastry filled with chopped nuts and dates. We took our seats to the background hum of stringed instruments and rhythmic clapping. The Iraqi actor switched to English: “First we attend to the stomach, and then to the soul. Now we can talk. Open our hearts. Look each other in the eye. And tell tales.” Garner added: “Are you warm? At peace? Ah, now we can begin...Yes, once upon a time.”

Robin Laurie explained: “The thing that is really important is the notion of hospitality,” Laurie explained. “Most other cultures will take in the stranger. A stranger knocks on the door (and) you have an obligation to offer them hospitality for the night. And that really struck me because that’s not something we do ... So at the beginning of the performance that was the thing about people welcoming the audience, offering the tea and dates and something to eat and having a chat. Partly also that’s to try to make the gap between the audience and the performers porous: to break down that gap. Everyone is a part of the same event. The audience is as much a part of it as the performers.”

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Michael Aboujundi sat behind Robin Laurie, slightly to her left, as she introduced the play on opening night. He once told me of the obligation to welcome in the country he’d fled. “It is considered to be extremely rude and stingy - the word ‘stingy’ is used a lot if you do not properly welcome stranger. If someone knocked on my door and asked for food or something, you cannot say no. It’s as simple as that. If you say no, you would probably have to apologise hundreds of times. Maybe you don’t have something to offer at that particular moment. But there is always something else you can do. If a person came asking for food and you don’t have that, for whatever reason, you can say okay, here is some money. You go and get yourself something to eat or drink.”

His mother once asked why he had not invited some African students in the next street home for dinner. “Sure enough, they came and had a nice meal. And since that day we were very good friends. Now they are in Canada...”

Had he expected such hospitality when he came here? “Absolutely. We never ever thought of being locked up behind barbed wire, isolated and forgotten.”

He’d not lost faith in his adopted country. “When we walked in there we were dealing with a government, a bureaucracy, the ugly face. But when we knocked at the door at Fitzroy Learning Network, you saw the beautiful face of the Australian people.”

Robin Laurie’s confidence was shaken. “I feel that my life is changed by every different group of people because you engage so intensely and I always do a lot of cultural research. I research the music, the cultural history. I read novels and poetry, I engage with current politics and events. I try and put things in an informed and rich context. I use the languages and the dialects.

“I had believed the myth of Australia as in some way a genuinely tolerant multicultural nation, despite the awful realities of our relations with Indigenous Australians. And it’s true during the ‘70s and the ‘80s, I think, Australia was a world leader in fields like multicultural education in particular. I remember reading that in Italy people were looking at Australia in terms of bilingual education and integrating migrants. Then during the ‘90s it became very clear that we weren’t; that terrible racist undercurrents still existed. And this (Kan Yama Kan) crystallised all of that. I went back and looked at Australian history. Federation was in fact designed around maintaining a specifically white British culture, a bastion against the
coloured hordes ...I read a piece by (human rights activist) Chris Sidoti about the twin threads of racism and punishment running through Australian history. The depth of those threads through Australian culture was a revelation to me. They had always been there and it was my ignorance that I hadn’t understood them.”

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The Age headlined its review of Kan Yama Kan as “a cure for xenophobia”. “When a performance by and about asylum seekers sells out before its first night, we are probably entitled to conclude that the minority of Australians who oppose the Federal government’s border protection policy are passionate and committed,” its theatre critic, Helen Thomson, enthused. “… No wonder the Howard government has isolated the refugee detention centres. Almost without exception, it seems, those people who have had any face-to-face contact with asylum seekers become concerned supporters.” Thomson wrote that this production provided an opportunity for audiences to meet “a handful of ‘others’ who have been politically demonised and shamefully treated, who turn out to be people just like ourselves”.

The Australian’s Martin Ball had some misgivings. As theatre, he concluded, Kan Yama Kan “struggles to get off the ground”. “The structure is simplistic, lacking dramatic tension, and the various narratives are episodic and disjointed. The amateur performers try hard, but stumble in rhythm and delivery…” But this was not just theatre. “These criticisms must of course be weighed against the enormous achievement in simply putting the show together. The performers showed great strength and courage in simply being on stage, where they speak in a foreign language – English – and revisit moments of personal anguish and trauma.” Ball wrote that apart from the extraordinary tales of oppression and flight, the stories that “bite hardest” were of circumstances in which the refugees now found themselves. “The lasting impression from the play is of the hollow victory that is the temporary protection visas, little better than purgatory after months or years of detention. The whole scenario is summed up in the words of one refugee: ‘I came seeking freedom, and I found a prison. I arrived full of hope; all I have left is despair’.”
CHAPTER SIX

**Thirty five months to curtain-up.** The telephone rang. Singer-songwriter Kavisha Mazzella heard a familiar voice. “Look, I’m with a couple of Kosovar refugees, can we come over and eat a meal?” Mazzella was a little irked at this. She wasn’t in the mood for hosting her friend and his friends, among thousands from the Kosova region of the Balkans granted temporary protection by the Howard government in the late 1990s. But she wasn’t about to turn away a man she regards as an unsung hero – “inspiring and intelligent and broke; an artists’ artist making films that question rather than make you feel good.”

Mazzella credits filmmaker Tahir Cambis as “a real catalyst” for her own activism. “So I made a dinner for them ... and then he kind of got me in.” He invited her along to a protest at Maribyrnong Detention Centre days after a Tongan man killed himself on the day he was to be deported. “Tahir occupied the roof of the of detention centre with a few friends as a protest.” Fifty three year-old Villiami Tanginoa died after diving headfirst to the ground from a basketball pole on December 22, 2000. He’d been detained after overstaying his three-month visa by 17 years.

In footage obtained by Cambis and his co-director Helen Newman for their documentary, *Anthem*, we see an official in white shirt and dark tie pass, bouncing a ball in the rain. He passes mattresses stacked beneath the pole. Above him, a large man crouches precariously on the basketball board. He rises, steadying himself with his left hand before plunging down. “We saw the bloodied mattresses near the dumpsters outside and I said to Helen - I remember quite clearly - that that is odd because everything related to what happened that day related to evidence. Any kind of crime coverage or investigation you get the evidence first at whatever level and make sure that it is all collated and these mattresses were being dumped the next day. They were used to mop up the blood and along with that the basketball pole was cut down the same day. It’s on the video footage. So in doing that you are automatically removing everything that the coroner needs to assess what happened…”

Cambis narrated *Anthem*. He tells us that Tanginoa pleaded to speak to an immigration officer. “Witnesses report taunts and indifference on the part of the guards.”

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Best known for the award-winning *Exile in Sarajevo*, filmed while visiting his parents’ former hometown in Bosnia in the mid-1990s, he took Mazzella and others including a man who survived a Bosnian death camp to the Maribyrnong centre with him three days after Tanginoa’s death. He smuggled a camera into the centre on Christmas Day 2000. He has footage of a young Iraqi man they came to see. “I stuck my video camera inside my groin. A South African security guard was monitoring us. He kept looking in the window. He knew something was going on....”

Cambis’ family fled Sarajevo in World War II. He has been told his mother saved Jewish families from the SS. “She was one of those warriors – a very, very strange woman but a brilliant one. They say that she was one of the best singers in Bosnia.”

He was born in a refugee camp in the Bavarian city of Nuremberg in the late 1950s. “I hung out with American soldiers. They were always on the alert. The Cuban crisis in 1962, whatever... In that time there, Spencer Tracy, Judy Garland and Marlene Dietrich had all been there filming the Nuremberg trials movie. It was a really interesting time. Elvis Presley’s songs were hits.”

His grandfather, among East European refugees from communism recruited by the US Army, traded American supplies on the black market while serving in the Quartermaster Corps. “He was basically the king of Nuremberg. He told the mayor what to do. Nuremberg to me is such a symbolic city to be born. My play time was in World War II ruins. It was still being rebuilt. So to me my first years on this planet were seeing people who were in transit. Everything was temporary. Peace was a pause between wars.”

Cambis was six or seven when he boarded a Melbourne-bound boat with his mother and sister. “My mother had a habit of attracting men and breaking hearts and so the guy there when he heard she was coming to Australia to join my father – at the hydroelectric scheme – stowed away on a lifeboat and we had to feed him each night until he got caught and dragged down the gangplank at some port on the Horn of Africa. I still remember his screams.”

The marriage didn’t work out and his mother took the children to Sydney. “My best friend’s parents ran a Sydney pub and on Friday nights they’d take me to Luna Park in the back of the Holden, give me their sons’ spare short suit and tie and Brylcreem. I was seven or eight
years old ... sitting in the back of a Holden. The mother had a pants suit with high hair and those butterfly glasses.”

They moved to Adelaide. “My mother and I had a really, really close relationship. She was a really good mother. Bosnian mothers are really warm and attentive the same time very strict about respect which is a good combination. You don’t get spoiled. She was witty and knew how to laugh. I discovered later, when I started mixing with other Bosnians back there, that they love to laugh and joke even in wartime. It’s a great, great trait to have for survival.”

He didn’t realise it. But his mother was succumbing to schizophrenia. She struggled to cope with her children. “She was worried about not being able to look after me and my sister and someone told her if you abandon your kids in a park, the State will look after them. She didn’t know that you could go and make a request for help and assistance. She couldn’t speak English.”

A state ward who spent much of his childhood in boys’ homes, Cambis was expelled from school at 14, for “being a clown” he says, and educated himself reading books by the likes of Herman Hesse, Italo Calvino, Colin Wilson and the French existentialists. “They were my secret teachers.”

Mother and son lost touch and it was not until two years after her death that he learned she had taken her own life. “I think it was in 1983 that she committed suicide. She climbed into an incinerator and incinerated herself, very calmly. Her jewellery and scarf all carefully placed on a chair. That was being contemplated for two weeks. She just picked a moment to do it.”

He worked in factories and sales through his teens. “I actually launched into film and TV as a stuntman in the Mad Max era. A lot of my friends were in the film. I was an actor from my teen years.”

Cambis co-founded a Carlton venue, Budinski’s Theatre of Exile, “set up with $20 to be a kind of open place space for actors, musicians, cabaret performers....We also had Sinn Fein people there. When one of the Birmingham Six people was released and arrived in Melbourne he sang us a few Irish ditties. It’s all on video tape.”
Kavisha Mazzella launched Budinski’s at the Nova cinema building in Lygon Street in 1995. “I don’t know if we paid her or not. I was impressed by her generosity and professionalism and also by the warmth and I suppose her identity as not necessarily a wasp Australian. Her life and career were totally integrated with Australia. We had a lot in common, I think.”

He was in filming in Bosnia – and feared the worst - when he heard there had been a change of government in Australia. He was in Sarajevo when he saw news of the Coalition’s 1996 Federal election victory on CNN. He was not a fan of the new Prime Minister. “I put my head in my hands and I said, my god what have they done?”

Later, he’d take friends in the arts and TV with him to visit detainees at Maribyrnong detention centre. “I took in Paul Grabowsky. Helen and I took members of the cast of *SeaChange*, Tom Long, Kate Atkinson and Alice Garner. They were joking in the car on the way in. On the way out it was just silence. They were shattered. In those days anybody could visit (the detention centre) as long as you had a name of a person to visit like a prison. Up until the day of that protest it was pretty much free access. What they didn’t know was that I was taking in some very connected people. Arnold Zable, Kavisha Mazzella, anybody I could grab my hands on. I wanted to spread the word. I wanted to have I suppose an organic groundswell, a movement, occur…. Helen and I just had this circle of friends. We started pounding our hands into the water and let the ripples go out…”

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Zable and Mazzella would collaborate on two songs featured in *Kan Yama Kan* – ‘All God’s Beggars’ and ‘700 Rolls (Anytime the Wind Can Change)’. “It’s fantastic to work with Kavisha,” Zable said. “…Just before the play was going to go on, she played me 700 Rolls, and I began to cry when I heard the way the lyrics were so beautifully married to the melody. She is a great songwriter, both in terms of melody and lyrics.”

Mazzella remembered their collaboration fondly. “It was so much fun. I’d email him a verse and then he would write the second verse and I would write the chorus. I think it was the first time that he had written a song. He was really excited about it. And he was almost delirious when he heard people singing. He was so ecstatic. Like he couldn’t believe, I suppose, the immediacy of the experience of people singing your words.” *All God’s Beggars*, she told me, “is about the eye witness stories, about the SIEVX…and other boats”. “In the
dead of the night,” she sang lines co-written with Zable, “there’s *A Knock at the Door* / the urgent voice tells you to flee / you must find a safe place / your freedom / there’s no queue when you run for your life...”

Each was influenced by their heritage. Zable’s father, Meir, was a Yiddish poet who once wrote: “I felt like a lost soul in this land, a man without friends, or language or will/ When suddenly a friendly hand reached out, and in that instance, I felt at home.”

Arnold Zable translated these lines from a poem, *A Friendly Hand*, in the liner notes to a 2003 CD released as a soundtrack to his book, *The Fig Tree*.

He was drawn to Yiddish theatre as a child in Carlton. “For us, the village children, the actors were mentors,” he wrote in a 1990s book on a Melbourne-based theatre ensemble. “We learnt one thing above all... To give, from the heart, 100 per cent... On stage they were in another realm and, in turn, they transported us into that same realm. They took the audience away from their everyday concerns. Away from their daily struggle to make good in the New World. Away from their efforts to start life afresh, and rebuild from the ashes of the old.”

In this theatre, he discovered the importance of music – the centrality of Jewish song. “Where did it begin, this folk art called Yiddish theatre?” he wrote. “First came the nigun, the pure melody; then the words that embellish the melody; while always, there was the journey, the wanderings of an ancient people. Everywhere they travel they took their nigun with them; and wherever they moved they shaped their melody into new forms, adapting it to new surroundings, new influences. But always it was imbued with the nigun. For in the nigun could be heard both the prayer and the celebration, the joy and the lamentation of a nation of nomads, forever in search of a place of refuge, a haven, a place to take root.”

Mazzella’s songwriting is informed by the Italian folk song. She has collected traditional music since a guest with an armful of cassette tapes turned up at a party at her Perth flat when she was a student. His name was Gianni Margio and he would later perform with her and her brother, Antonio, in a WA-based trio and with Antonio in a comedy duo. She was in her early 20s when Margio arrived with Sicilian and Neopolitan records. She was thrilled at the sound of guitar, mandolins, recorders, small drums, tambourines and vocals quite
different to any she’d heard. The rich musical tradition of Italian folk songs dating way back to at least the 1400s would become “a bit of an obsession”.

Paola Mazzella was born to an Italian father and Irish-Scottish-Burmese mother (she took the name Kavisha, Indian for “goddess of poetry,” she said). She was three when the family migrated to Perth from London. Her mother tried to persuade her father to speak to their children in Italian. But he feared it would disadvantage them. “And so I lost my language,” she once told me. “My father felt I would be made fun of at school if I was too Italian. Already I looked strange and was the wrong colour, whatever. In some ways, I still feel a stranger to Italian culture, even though I’ve done whatever I could to immerse myself, in whatever way I could.”

Mazzella’s music radiates with the influence of traditional music she described as “the ocean of people’s histories, desires, sorrows, stories, experiences. Not done in a twee way but with a fire and a passion. It’s incredibly potent and rich.”

Her parents met at Stoke Mandeville Hospital in England where her father was working as an orderly, her mother a nurse studying midwifery. “My mum was a refugee when the Japanese bombed Rangoon. She walked to India with her mum and two brothers and they went to join grandfather. They were in the north of Burma at the time and then walked to Nagaland. I’ve got other relatives who were further south. They were captured by Japanese and in the camps. “…I didn’t grow with those stories. They were hidden because it was too painful. So it wasn’t mentioned. I did go to see a film called Empire of the Sun by Steven Spielberg. I remember my mum panicking when the bombs were falling and they had to run. She said, ‘My God, it reminds me of when we had to leave’.”

Her mother’s family were Anglo-Burmese. The family’s surname was Stewart. “My mother’s mother came to live with us when I was small and she played banjo,” she said. “So we used to have lots of singalongs.” Her mother played guitar. Mazzella coveted the instrument and tried unsuccessfully to persuade her to part with it. She was 12 when she received her first guitar. “I came home from school one day and there was a cardboard box with a guitar in it. It was beautiful. I was just in seventh heaven.”

She formed a trio I Papaveri (The Poppies). Mazzella was unprepared for the response when I Papaveri performed in front of a group of Italian women in a dilapidated Fremantle church
in the late 1980s. “I went along to play these traditional songs and the women just started singing back. I was really amazed at the power. It was a beautiful, pre-industrial sound. The kind that makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. “It was like a recognition. They got up and started to dance.” She was moved in a way she had not expected. “…When I heard those women singing back to me, it was like I couldn't move. I was just transfixed. I thought, 'I want people to hear this sound.' For me, it's important to track that songline, if you like. A lot of people have come on a journey. The music has been a fantastic bridge to make that journey.”

Mazzella founded Le Gioie Delle Donne (The Joys of Women), a choir of first- and second-generation Italian migrants that was the subject of an ABC documentary. Her sense of herself as an Australian was particularly strong when visiting Italy. “I feel sometimes so much like an outsider. I'm trying to make a connection with this part of my jigsaw puzzle.” She moved to Melbourne a few years later. Playbox theatre company approached her to create another choir, for a production based on the autobiography that WA woman Emma Ciccotosto co-wrote with historian Michal Bosworth after retiring from a biscuit factory where she worked for 32 years. Ciccotosto told of her childhood in Casalbordino in the Abruzzi, and migrating with her mother to join her father near Waroona, south of Perth. “I said, 'I don't really want to do it, but I'll do it for two months while the show's on'....”

*Emma, A Translated Life* was first published by Fremantle Arts Centre Press in 1990 (Emma, A Recipe For Life with Ciccotosto's recipes and narrative appeared subsequently). Le Gioie Delle Donne performed an adaption for stage two years later.

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In Melbourne, about 50 women responded to advertising in the Italian community newspaper, *Il Globo*, in late 1995 to set up a women’s choir. They took the title, La Voce Della Luna, from a film by the Italian director, Federico Fellini. Among the first choristers, Romana Tomininovi had lost the will to sing in a period of grief, gestured at her throat “I sort of closed my voice,” she gestured at her throat when we met at choir practice on a cold Monday night in north suburban Preston in early 2000. “So here, I open up a little bit.” Lights were on at the corner of High and Showers Streets. More than 30 women who turned
up at a salmon-pink building were among the “roaming members”, as musical director Kavisha Mazzella put it.

“Fa li la li la,” the choristers sang. They stood in a circle, facing Mazzella. Now she played an accordion; later she’d strum a steel-string. They were singing a song called “Ricciulina”. “It is very likely to be a song written to a courtesan,” Mazzella once explained. “This man has his favourite courtesan. She’s making a living. So she is not loyal to him; she is loyal to whoever pays her. But he has fallen in love with her and he feels betrayed by her. It’s from Naples in the 1600s. The Spanish were in Naples for 300 years. So you get that real Spanish feeling.”

“When you sing these old songs, you are connecting with generations and generations,” she told me of the songs of love and betrayal from regions including Sicily, Campania, Puglia with Abbruzzi and Piedmont she has recorded. “You are going back in time and you're really connecting with a kind of a psyche that is of the pre-industrial age. It is a psyche that understood the weather, the stars, the wind, the earth and the seasons. It is very earthy and somehow a relief to all the spin and glitter and glitz and the speed of our times.”

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Arnold Zable spoke of eras of activism. “I was involved in both the anti-Vietnam War movement and in this movement,” he told me. “…And this movement in support of asylum seekers, in my view, has been, and continues to be more important and more enduring and lasting because it appealed to a broad cross-section of Australian society. And because it involves the critical question: Who are we as a nation? What sort of a nation are we? What sort of a nation do we want to be?”

He addressed this question in the play by drawing on part of his book, The Fig Tree, in which he describes a visit to Thessaloniki, where a monument was to be laid for Jews lost in the Holocaust. In this particular story, ‘Walking Thessaloniki’, he wrote about the island of Zakynthos in the Ionian Sea where the local bishop is said to have signed his name 238 times after the Nazis demanded a list of its 238 Jews and said he would share their fate if they were deported.

Zable had read an article in The Age about a Turkish-flagged boat, the Brenier, which broke down on the Ionian Sea in November 2001. The Greek coast guard towed the Brenier to Zakynthos Town with 714 Iraqi Kurds and Afghan refugees on board who were abandoned
by the crew. The island was located south of Ithaca, where his wife’s family was from. “I was there before. So I could visualise it and it was one of the reasons I was attracted to the story,” Zable told me. “I followed up on the story and managed to get articles from the Greek press about it. This story forms the basis of the second song, 700 Rolls (Anytime the Wind Can Change). The baker came with 700 sandwiches he had prepared. We used poetic licence to make it rolls - one of the ways by which Kavisha fitted the lyrics to her melody.”

The townsfolk brought food, clothes and blankets and they ferried the pregnant women or women with babies to hospital or put them up in hotels. “This was at a time when we were literally beginning to turn boats back out to sea,” the writer said.

In the story he wrote of two Greek words - filoxenia and xenophobia. This idea was woven into the play. “Xenophobia is the better known word in the English language,” Zable said. “It means fear of the stranger - and there are reasons why we have fear of the stranger. But filoxenia means friend of the stranger and it’s an ancient practice. It’s actually mentioned in The Odyssey and so we end up with a paragraph.”

He pointed to the last paragraph in a chapter titled Walking Thessaloniki in which he suggests that we should venture out, as seafarers might, and remind ourselves that this continent is an island after all, and “recall that our forebears were strangers who approached these alien shores by boat”.

He and Mazzella exchanged emails to come up with the lyrics: “The island folk know with one shift in the wind those secure today will be cast adrift; they are not afraid to welcome the stranger to give a helping hand to lives that are in danger…”

Zable spoke of a tradition of welcoming the stranger, of answering a knock on the door. “First you are greeted and fed and given a roof over your head. And only then are you asked questions. It's the basic law of welcoming the stranger, the ship-wrecked sailor. The reason for this is quite simple. Island people, seafarers, and nomadic peoples know all too well, that with just one shift in the wind you can be the stranger. That is what it comes down to, and that is why it is so inclusive and so powerful and can turn a person’s thinking around: With just a change in the wind we could be the stranger and wouldn't we want to have the door opened to our desperate pleas?
When I left *The Age* it occurred to me that I had been a generalist through much of my career as news reporter and feature writer. Others had rounds or beats. They specialised in covering the arts, sport, crime, politics, health and other aspects. If anything, mine was, I concluded, the bleeding heart beat. My interest was underscored by an element of activism that might account for the kinds of stories I sought out and the appeal of a band of refugees telling stories to win a reprieve from being put back in harm’s way. I think back sometimes to the first story I covered and its enduring impact. An 11-year-old girl had drowned on the first day of the summer holidays. Editors at *The Argus* afternoon newspaper in Cape Town, where I grew up, decided to report this tragic event. You might think that, being a sensitive matter, they’d have dispatched one of their more experienced journalists to talk to the family. Instead, they summoned two rookies on the first day on the job. It was the summer of 1978. I was about to complete a postgraduate degree in journalism at the University of Stellenbosch, in the winegrowing Boland region outside Cape Town. In order to complete the course at the university’s newly created Department of journalism, students are to spend six weeks or so working for a newspaper or some other media organisation.

As we prepared to leave the newsroom that morning, we were instructed to make sure that we came back with all the photographs the family had also girl who had drowned so that the morning newspapers would not have access to any. We ignored this instruction. As I recall it, we did not ring ahead to alert them that we were on our way or ask permission to visit them. Old hands at the Argus might have thought this would be a sobering experience that would bring to earth a pair of opinionated graduates filled with high-minded, impractical notions in an era when relatively few journalists had been required, or indeed encouraged, to complete tertiary education before beginning their careers. This would knock the stuffing out of us. We would be quickly put in our place and discover that newspaper reporting could be confronting.

Ironically, the grieving family welcomed us warmly and invited us into the tiny cottage. They sat us down to tea and biscuits, if I remember correctly, and allowed us to peruse the family photo album and borrow a photograph of a young girl with a promise which I certainly hope
we honoured, to return it promptly. If we feared that they might regard us as intruders at such a time, we were quickly made it to feel that they appreciated that we had taken the trouble to come all the way to their house to mark the passing of their daughter/granddaughter/ sister/ niece/ cousin. Back at the newspaper in the city centre, I remember standing alongside our desks deep in discussion with the other intern. We were unsure whether or not it was appropriate to mention race, as was commonly done in South African newspapers at the time. Without consulting the news editor or anyone else there that day, we made a decision. I like to think that we decided then against the convention and did not mention that the 11 year old girl who lost her life on a segregated beach on the first day of her summer holiday was from the Coloured (as people of mixed descent were then referred to and may still be) community. I would like to think that we agreed that it was enough to indicate her age. I would like to think that the sub editors did not see fit to add this particular context that meant so much in apartheid era South Africa even if it seemed irrelevant. Surely it was clear from the photograph, if anyone really need to know. But I do not have any clipping of the story as it appeared and I cannot tell you if this was the case.

The story was just a few paragraphs of single column on the left-hand side of the page, as I recall it. What I do know, or at least strongly suspect, at a time when the community was relatively marginalised, the family might have been more receptive to publication of the story recording her death than might have been the case had they been from the relatively privileged white community. Of course I have no proof beyond the tenuous proof of an imprint from the teeth of a dog and under doors that had remained shut at the home of a white family I visited days later after their daughter was killed in a motorbike accident near a popular beach. They called this kind of assignment a “death knock”. I’ve had misgivings on the very rare occasions when called on to do this kind of work. A minor dog attack would have seemed a reasonable response to me at the time. I can imagine that I would not want some pesky journalists troubling my family in grief. Whatever the reason for the welcome, the encounter with the drowned girl’s family had an impact. It seemed that we had done something worthwhile. We had acknowledged in a small way a life that might have otherwise not have been noted in the broader community. Intentionally or not, we had honoured her passing. The story, as I saw it later, might at least have been a way of showing
that she was someone who deserved mention. I may be fooling myself. But I like to think that I have been drawn to stories about ordinary people, doing the extraordinary. I like to think that this has not made me a lesser journalist than I might otherwise have been. I may be wrong.

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The players sat high, legs dangling against red drapes or stood waiting to approach the front of the stage. One woman remained apart though. You could make her out, silhouetted behind a screen. You wondered what she was doing there. “I could see the chorus, the singers, sitting there,” she’d recall. “I could hear everybody.” Her features lit from behind opaque paper in a pressed metal frame, she’d heard Alice Garner ask if we were warm enough, our bellies full, our hearts open. She’d heard Majid Shokor announce it was time to light the candelabra.

Had she been free at this time to step out with the others, she’d have stood, hands held high, snapping thumbs against forefingers three times to every clap of palms. She’d have kept the rhythm as Mazzella sang gently, her soft voice and plaintive harmonium filling the room. She’d have stepped forward slowly with others in a slow parade to the front, then back again. Had she not been compelled to remain where she was, she’d have stood or sat with the rest as a young man stepped forward. “My name is Usama, with a U. I come from the Middle East. ...”

Instead, she sat alone as a sturdy man with thick black hair, rimless glasses and chequered cotton Arabic scarf or keffiyeh, approached the audience. She heard him say he came all the way from Sanandaj, capital of the Iranian province of Kordestan. “My city is circled by mountains. We are Kurdish people. We love to go to the mountains to the hot springs and lakes. Every Friday with my big family, 22 uncles and aunties, we had picnics and in winter I used to have snowball fights with my daughter.”
Did she see the youngster in bright yellow jumper join her father on cue, smiling as he wrapped a big arm around her? Or the lean, rangy man from Baghdad, lines creasing his angular face, tilting his head to one side, hands now extended in front of him, now dropped to his sides, he spoke of his longing for the place left behind? “I miss my family. I miss my country. I miss my pigeons.”

Hassan’s grandfather had given him two pigeons. His father made a small cage. He had a photo of his pigeons. “I always keep it with me”.

From behind the screen she heard Hassan say: “In Iraq my pigeons would always fly home because they felt safe. I do not feel safe anywhere, not in Iraq, not in Australia. I am still flying in circles looking for somewhere safe to be my home. We came for freedom. Why did they lock us up? We came for peace. We came to make a new life. Why do they want to send us back?”

When he had spoken this piece, he stepped back. Then the woman behind the screen spoke quietly. She too was from Baghdad – “a beautiful country, rich with history, culture, natural resources and 22 million people”. She was the second eldest of four sisters. She had two brothers. Herfather was a merchant who traded dates, rice, wheat and other goods. He was a canny businessman even though he had never gone to school. As a boy, he had studied with Al Mullah, an old man who taught the children Al Quran.

She spoke from her confined place on stage. “My mother was the spoiled, youngest daughter and she was the only one in her family who went to school,” she told us. “In the 1940s and 1950s not many girls attended school. Year after year she was successful and surprised the whole family until my father chose her as a wife and she had to leave school and accept him as a husband. But, there were conditions. She wanted a modern house, a TV, a fridge and a Persian carpet. In the 1960s these things cost a fortune. But my father was ready to sacrifice a lot for her, not just because she was beautiful, but because she had been educated. He always felt his lack of education and he felt she would complete this gap in him.”

Her father, who would accompany her with her two children to Australia, would travel extensively. On school holidays, he’d take his family with him. “Can you imagine eight persons, most of them kids, travelling around the world with their father to make deals and
business. Life in that time seemed an endless beautiful journey which only stopped when school started again. At an early age I was lucky to see all these beautiful cities: Beirut, Istanbul, Cairo, Hamburg, Tehran, Damascus, Kuwait and Delhi. After years of hard work they became rich. We were good in school, and everything was just great.”

She told us her name was Zahara. It was an assumed name that masked her identity. I would come to know her as Aoham al Dujali.

She married young, was mother to a young son, worked as a teacher. But whatever remained of the charmed life of childhood was forever gone. The voice behind the screen told us of eight long years when, she said, “we felt even the sky is more red than it should be when the sunset came” and further hardship “when America gathered armies and weapons from all over the world against my people”.

“We never imagined that with the end of the bombing we would start a new war against diseases and poverty. A life with no electricity, no medicine, with polluted water and polluted air.”

She summoned up “hard, dark days”. “Two thousand American bombs a day were exploded on my city. The explosions became part of our lives. When the bombs started the children were running towards me trying to hide, putting their hands tightly on their tiny ears.

Nothing you did could remove this fear from these young hearts. In that horrible time we did nothing but pray....During these years my father lost most of his money but we kept struggling life seen too long and too gloomy to live. That was when my older brother’s death became certain and it seemed other members of the family would face the same end. We left almost everything behind and ran for our lives. When they are hungry lions behind you, you don’t knock at the door either.”

Aoham heard of a “warm, safe, green land”. She was in her 30s when she flew from Jakarta to Bali to Lombok with her father and two children. From there, they set out on a boat with more than 80 passengers.

“I heard the smuggler calling us,” she’d tell the audience. “I picked up my big bag with one hand and my little daughter with the other and we started walking towards the sea. I was tripping over the broken trees and trying to see on that dark moonless night and I began to remember all the things I had heard about the sea, the storms and the sharks. While the
boat moved into the deep I was staring at the land and saw the space getting wider and wider and for the first time I asked myself, ‘What am I doing? Where am I going? Am I really taking my children and risking our lives in this way? I should go back… before it’s too late.

On the fifth day there was nothing for breakfast and I told my daughter that they didn’t give us breakfast because lunch would be great and big and delicious. But my faith always made me have hope and I was always telling myself, Allah will put his hand over me and my children to help us resist hunger and fear and will put his merciful hand under this boat to protect it from sinking and the candle which Allah lit in my heart will light not only my heart but my way too.”

Once upon a time her father regaled her with stories about the figure of a winged Assyrian lion with a man's head she’d seen in the Baghdad library as a child. He’d told her had been her people's protector since 3500BC. After spotting an Australian aircraft overhead near Ashmore Reef, she thought once again of this mythical figure. She waved and shouted to attract the pilot’s attention. “At last,” she thought, “we are safe.”

Onstage, someone placed a bowl with candles under the screen. “We all started waving and shouting, trying to attract the pilot’s attention and I knew that we all felt the same when I saw the tears of happiness in the eyes of the boat people.”

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The night before Kan Yama Kan was due onstage in Federal Parliament, Aoham Al Dujayli appeared in an ABTV program, speaking at a forum in outer east Melbourne of her confusion when detained at the remote West Australian centre near the Pilbara town of Port Hedland, more than 1300km from Perth, more than 600 from Broome. “I was shocked because I’m not a criminal. I was a teacher. And I have children. I’m well educated. I never did anything wrong in my life. So why I put in a jail?”

Aoham told me of the elation at being finally released into the community from the detention centre, Australia’s first when it was set up for Cambodian refugees on disused BHP men’s quarters in May 1991.

“We were just so happy to be out of the detention centre that we didn’t care. You can drop us anywhere. You can drop us in the desert; as long as we are out of the jail.”
She’d checked into a motel after an exhausting cross-country trek, more than 5000km north and east in the vast landscape among more than 80 passengers recently released from captivity. “They took us all by bus from Port Hedland to Brisbane, 56 hours non-stop across the country,” the silhouetted figure continued. “In Brisbane they took us to a centre and gave us a lot of papers and $160. At the end of four hours of information I found myself standing on the street carrying a lot of papers, most of them in English, with my elderly father and my two children. I looked at the street and at the passing people and I found myself free but scared, not knowing the next step. I didn’t know where I could buy food and where we would spend the night. How to start this new life?”

The former primary teacher not only acted in Kan Yama Kan, but was one of the writers. Her place behind the screen intrigued some audiences. Alice Garner remembered question time after a performance at a girls’ school. One of the students asked to see the woman behind the screen. Aoham stepped out then to a round of applause. “Even though it was to a room of girls it was a really big step. Thinking what happened later with Aoham that seemed like quite a significant moment.”

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A grey and white cat licked her kitten in her northern-suburbs living room when I visited the week in March 2003 of George W Bush’s 48-hour ultimatum to Saddam Hussein and his sons, Uday and Qusay, to leave Iraq or face military action. Aoham’s husband’s parents, four brothers and four sisters were still in Baghdad. I changed names in a report at the time to protect family in Iraq. Aoham’s husband fidgeted with a string of beads. He had quit work as a labourer two months earlier. When he complained of severe stomach pain, his wife wanted to call an ambulance. But he “knew it was not my body but something bigger”. He had been expecting this war for years. “This is a long story,” he said.

Noon. I was with them when the US ultimatum ended.

12.25pm. “Maybe a miracle will come,” Aoham said.

12.30pm. A yellow sedan appeared in the driveway. A friend, who would fly to Syria that week to be closer to family, was at the door.

1pm. TV news.

The postman arrived. Aoham set aside an unopened letter from Baghdad.
We met unexpectedly in January 2005 – almost two years after the start of the 21-day second US-led invasion of Iraq from March 20 2003 in which American, British, Australian and Polish troops ostensibly set out to disarm Iraq’s nuclear and biological “weapons of mass destruction” and end Saddam Hussein’s support for terrorism. Subsequent investigations in the US revealed that there was no substance to claims that Iraq had sought uranium for nuclear weapons in Niger and Bush administration officials had manipulated evidence to support claims of links between Iraq and al-Qaeda.

Aoham greeted me at a suburban community hall where she was helping expatriate Iraqis voting in their country’s transitional national assembly election. She was then among almost 3500 of 10,000 or more Iraqis in Victoria who put their names down to vote at polling booths in suburban Broadmeadows, Preston and Noble Park in Melbourne and Shepparton in the Goulburn Valley. Voting would continue until the following day, the day of national elections in Iraq. Because of the time difference, the first votes in the Iraqi diaspora were cast in Australia. Some reports estimated at least a million of about 4.5 million mostly Shiite Iraqis overseas were eligible to vote and would exercise a disproportionate say in the future of a country, where voters among 25 million people faced serious security risks.

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Years passed. Aoham suggested we meet at a restaurant and bar overlooking the Yarra and city skyline. I knew she had changed. Arnold Zable had told me how he met her unexpectedly one evening months earlier at a Jewish socialist meeting he invited Majid Shokor to address and heard her account of the changes in her life since they worked together on the play. “I noticed this woman sitting in the front row, a very beautiful woman. I thought she was familiar. Then Majid got up and said, ‘It’s great to be here. It’s great to see Aoham’. I hadn’t seen her for a while. She had taken off the scarf and she had separated from her husband. We went out and had dinner that night. She told me her extraordinary story....”

By the time we met five years after the transitional election, Aoham and her Iraqi husband had divorced. She had remarried and divorced again. She was, and wasn’t, the woman I met in the early 2000s. Her involvement in the play and encounters with the wider community “changed a lot of things in me and showed me what I can be and what I can do”. She’d
travelled overseas. In Jordan she saw a sign saying, ‘Baghdad’. “We were in the car. I was just crying, non-stop.” But as much as she was drawn to Iraq, there was no temptation to return permanently. “Australia is my home. It's a kind country. I have a feeling that my country wasn't kind to me...” She’d struggled with depression. “It is personal, but it's not like I can't say it.”

She had asked her son and daughter after a bitter dispute with their father to decide whether to come away with her or remain with him “and they both said, ‘Of course, we're with you’.” She no longer regarded herself as part of Melbourne’s Iraqi community. “I don't have a connection. They won't accept me there and I can’t accept them without being very critical and very emotional ...” Some in the community blamed her former husband. “He is not really inside the circle ...”

Aoham was in her early twenties when she first wore a headscarf. “Before I chose to do it, I had to study a lot of religion. I did a lot of Islamic studies, and became very religious. I read about Hell, and the afterlife and how women should do what they should do ...”

There was a time when the scarf made Aoham a target. “Things became really rough after September 11. I was getting attacked by people verbally. “

She’d come to Melbourne with her family after 18 months in Brisbane. She’d felt harassed there. One one occasion, stranger stepped out of his car and headed toward her. She wasn’t aware of him until her husband shouted. “I turned and this guy ... was behind me. He was going to either hit me or intimidate me.”

Her husband and children ran to her. “So I thought okay, one day it's going to happen to me.” She went for a week without the headscarf. “But I didn't like the fact that I had to take off something I chose to wear just because people were abusing me. The idea was to come here to be safe and to be free.”

We spoke briefly over a pounding drumbeat in a Southbank restaurant, then moved to the plush quiet of the nearby Arts Centre lobby. The mobile phone rang. Her daughter was on her way to meet her in the city. Aoham seemed concerned that her son had not fully come to terms with the change in their lives. Her father and a brother hadn’t accepted her decision “to live totally outside the culture and marry a man who was European”. She was caught between cultures, knocked back when she applied for teaching posts. She completed
studies in primary school teaching but took a job as a furniture salesman. “I went to the VIT people (Victorian Institute of Teaching) and I told them that I keep getting rejected by the schools. And they said change your name. Have a Western name. That might help.”

Her Iraqi husband had remarried. She’d seen him with his new wife at a citizenship ceremony months earlier. “You know what I felt?” She paused. “I felt like going to this woman and giving her a big hug and just saying to her, ‘I know what you are going through’. She and her former husband had not greeted each other. “When I saw him, for a few seconds I couldn’t breathe.”

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The voice that came from the behind the ornate screen was confident, as though long familiar with the language. Not so, Aoham insisted. “I came with no English. I knew, ‘ABCD, good morning, how are you?’” She’d studied the language at Southbank TAFE in Brisbane after her release from detention at Port Hedland in Western Australia’s Pilbara region in October 2000. Her husband, who followed his family, was in detention at Curtin in WA for some of this period. “That was the most peaceful year of my life. I was away from him with my children in Brisbane. People harassed me. It was a difficult life. But internally, it was so peaceful. I was just going to school and going home, shopping and cooking and sitting and studying English.”

There were a few women among the Kan Yama Kan players. “There was an Iranian Kurdish woman. She was okay. They are not as rigid as Arabs.” But she kept apart. “In my culture and my tradition I shouldn’t be there,” she’d explain. “I shouldn’t be on a stage performing. That’s considered part of being involved in art. And in my culture, if a woman belongs to a (respectable) family, she can’t do this. She can’t be involved in any way. I couldn’t do it without the approval of the father of my children. He needed to say, ‘Yes’.”

Majid Shokor, who’d been an actor in Baghdad and is known in Australia for his roles in films including director Michael James Rowland’s Lucky Miles in 2007 in which an Indonesian fishing boat leaves a group of Iraqi and Cambodian asylum seekers stranded in remote Western Australia, spoke of a “conservative attitude towards women doing any kind of art (in Iraq) until the time you get to a certain level and become famous. Then they change their attitude”.

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Shokor realised the family was struggling. “Her husband was concerned about what the community would think of him. I could feel the pressure from the community on him and on her, of course. She was so brave to take the initiative, to have the courage to act in a play. For her it was a very hard time. But because the community would say, he is letting his wife go dancing or whatever. It was very tough for him.”

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Friends she’d met through the Catholic Romero drop-in centre in Brisbane, introduced her to Carmel Davies and Robin Laurie. “At that stage I was very religious and still protective of my own values, (determined) not to get corrupted or influenced by this culture. I wanted to be safe and free but I didn't want you to do anything with me. So you stay there and I'm here - even with my children, protecting them to keep our value system. When I saw Carmel, she was lovely, but because of Brisbane weather, she was dressed openly, exposing too much, and I remember I just blocked her straight away from my mind. I didn't want to talk to this woman. I didn't want to even look at her. She was so friendly. She was really trying to get me into the conversation. I blocked her.”

Davies invited the family to dinner. Her friends told her that they wanted her to be in the play. “I took all my writings with me. For some reason, I thought I would share them. I’d heard about the play, I thought maybe they could use it. They said we want the Australian people to know what happened. The media is distorting a lot of things. So we need to let people know what the reality is. I remember I took my papers, all my writings, and gave them to Robin. I said, ‘I have written a few things, read them and I will be happy if you want to use them in the play’. Robin loved it.”

Davies and Laurie negotiated with her husband on her behalf. “I spoke to Carmel on the phone, and I said, look, I want to do it. I want to be part of it. So you talk to him. If I approached him, that could be a big problem in my life. I wanted it to come from outside. So you talk to him and find a way to convince him, telling him it is good for the visa, it’s going to be hard for the government to kick you out with your family. So she came and they were talking to him - Carmel and Robin. I pretended that I had no interest and I was surprised, just like him, and he said, ‘I can’t let my wife be exposed to people and be on a stage; this is outrageous, in my culture’. Robin came up with the idea and Carmel - I’m not sure which of
them - but I remember both of them suggested the idea of having a screen, where I would be covered. Robin designed it and her friend made it.”

Laurie remembered her first meeting with Aoham at a dinner at Carmel Davies’ home. Aoham was with Philip and Annie, the couple she met in Brisbane after release from detention in Port Hedland.

Talking of the Iraqi teacher’s predicament, she cheerily mentioned the title of a Noel Coward song, *Don’t Put Your Daughter on the Stage Mrs Worthington.* “The only people who performed in Iraq were prostitutes and women of ill-repute. But also there’s a prohibitions on public performance in Shia culture. I remember going to a meeting at one of the asylum seeker resource centres at Preston because I was trying to get people to be in the performance. I talked about it and said we think it will make a difference, it’s very important that your story be heard and, hopefully, it will change public opinion. And I said that there would be music. And some of the women said, we can't sing and we can’t dance in public.”

Aoham remembered the assurances made to gain her husband’s approval.

“We will pick her up. We will drop her home.”

Anne Horrigan-Dixon helped arrange transport to the show. “I rang all the taxi driving companies until I found a woman taxi driver. She couldn’t do it all the time. So I had to get other volunteers - women who would drive out and pick her up from Fawkner and bring her into the play.”

The audience would see her silhouette. “I came up with the idea of an Islamic window screen, the sort women would sit behind in the Middle East to watch and listen to what was going on with the male visitors,” Laurie said, “and then Trina Parker, the designer, took it to the VCA (Victorian College of the Arts) design studio. We had to beg borrow or steal lots of stuff. We got a design out of a book. It was pressed metal with tracing paper on the back of it then backlit.”

Laurie was determined to include Aoham in the production. “She was great because she was a writer. She was a serious thinker. She had a beautiful voice and she spoke good English. She understood the poetry. Majid and Aoham were the cultural brokers for me. They were cultural interpreters, the cultural teachers. They introduced me to poets and explained
things...There was a crucial breakthrough at one point in rehearsals. Majid wrote the running order out in Arabic on a big board.”

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Aoham reflected in a new language on the life she lived and the forces that had driven her here. Others were moved by what she wrote. “I think my way, the Arabic way, is different from Western writing. It’s quite poetic. That’s something that Arnold said many times to me. I use a lot of metaphorical language that it’s all from my culture. So it has a different taste for him. But for me, I was just expressing myself. I was just saying things I felt. I didn’t really write just for the play. I did my writing even before, in Brisbane. I was writing when I was learning English.”

Her father once sat in the Kan Yama Kan audience. “Yes, he came. He was happy with it.” She laughed at this. “He loved it.”

Her husband allowed her to take part but reluctantly. He once watched the show. “It’s hard to know what is inside him, or how he feels,” Aoham said. “But he wasn’t happy. He looked at it as (something) that could really help us to stay in the country. But at the same time, he was totally ashamed in front of the rest of the Iraqi people, the community.”

From her husband’s perspective, Kan Yama Kan must have seemed a disastrous influence. “It was. Just being friends with ... these women who couldn’t be controlled by men. Just being friends with these people was a very bad thing. He kept saying to my son, ‘They spoilt her. They ruined our marriage.’”

He might have feared – rightly – that Kan Yama Kan would undermine his hold on his wife, mother of his two children. “It changed my life, this play,” Aoham explained. “See, it was like a step. I stepped outside this little bubble of my family or traditional culture. How do I say it? It was a high fence, my culture. And I believed in it and I was happy....”

She paused. “Not happy but...This is my life. This is how I grew up, and this opens a door for other things.”

She’d married in her late teens “and by the age of 20 had two children sitting in my lap. So it all (the resistance to culturally accepted behaviour) was buried.”
Aoham became a permanent resident in 2005; an Australian citizen in 2007. Was she ever tempted to step back into the community? “I can't. I want to be happy. There are people who kept criticising me for making a choice like this, or offered me a good Muslim, an Iraqi or Lebanese guy. But I don't think I can live that life anymore. I just changed so much that I can't be there anymore.”
CHAPTER EIGHT

**Thirteen months to curtain-up.** He wore a bright red handkerchief in the pocket of his double-breasted blue suit. He knew this was a special occasion. But he’d never before been on holiday. So the Afghan-born 10-year-old wasn’t sure what to expect when he set off early one morning in October 2002 on one of two busloads of asylum seekers heading from inner Melbourne to the scenic Gippsland Lakes. Almost two years had passed since he was on a boat bound for Australia with his mother, and two sisters. “I only remember we were sleeping when water came in the boat,” said the boy, smiling to himself as he recalled his first thought was that his younger sister had wet herself.

He wore casual clothes with a peaked baseball cap and, despite early rain. He was looking forward to his first experience of swimming and canoeing at the camp on Raymond Island, a few minutes' ferry trip from Paynesville, 300 kilometres east of Melbourne. “I’m going to have a go,” said the boy, interned with his family at Woomera detention centre and now among more than 50 Afghan, Iraqi, Iranian and other asylum seekers at the camp organised by the Fitzroy Learning Network. “Most of them have never been outside Melbourne since they came here,” Anne Horrigan-Dixon explained. “Just to be able to get out of town and relax in a really nice environment will do them the world of good. I think people need an opportunity to just chill out.”

Volunteers brought halal meat in polystyrene boxes, cases of fruit and bags of onions. A group of women from North Fitzroy had baked biscuits and cakes. They stopped off at Moe’s Gippsland Heritage Village en route. The island’s Rural Australians for Refugees group held a welcoming barbecue. Michael Aboujundi remembered an incident en route to the holiday camp. “I remember on the way to Raymond Island, we stopped somewhere. There was a man running a mini market like a milk bar, and he was extremely friendly. I remember him saying, go for it guys.”

The boy with the bright red kerchief in his pocket was excited. His elder sister had been out playing soccer and ping-pong and was enjoying paddling in the water. Their mother was apprehensive. At 38, the only holidays she remembered were visits to holy places. She thought back to the uncertain journey here by boat and spoke of her concern for her children's safety here. Outdoor activities included fishing, waterskiing and sailing, raft-
building and a flying fox. Circus Oz members were to entertain and teach skills at the four-day outing.

The visitors had arrived at Raymond Island’s A’Beckett Park camp at a time when a report by Human Rights Commissioner Dr Sev Ozdowski tabled in Federal Parliament attributed violent protests in detention centres to lengthy periods in captivity and deprivation of basic rights. Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock countered that the factual errors “damage its overall credibility and authority”.

Some of the Raymond Island visitors slept eight to a room in double bunks. One man joked that it was a bit like Woomera. “Many of us are suffering depression and anxiety,” said Fahim, then 29, an illiterate shepherd until he went to school in his mid-teens and spent time in Pakistan and Iran, from which he was deported back to Afghanistan to face imprisonment by the Taliban in Kandahar. He’d spent nine months in detention at Woomera. He worried about his prospects at a review of his temporary protection visa in four months.

“When I first met Fahim,” Kan Yama Kan director Robin Laurie recalled, “he was fantastic. He was articulate, thoughtful, inspiring. Fahim was one of the really sad casualties of that time. He was incredibly bright. In the beginning of the campaign he was a public figure, speaking at the big rallies and all those sorts of things. But as time went on his energy and his optimism were just slowly crushed - slowly, slowly crushed.”

Fahim had a story to tell. When he was too distressed to tell it, another man stepped in on his behalf on occasion. “This is the story of an Afghan friend of mine,” Arif would say. “He is too sick and too depressed to be here tonight.”

Laurie welcomed Arif’s participation all the more because it was difficult to persuade Hazaras to take part in the production. “I spoke to a couple of the people at Fitzroy Learning Network trying to encourage them to be part of the performance and one of them said to me he had become really cynical and disillusioned. He said, ‘why should I do anything? I thought this was supposed to be a free country and it’s not. I thought this was a democratic country.’”

She’d tell them their stories would influence attitudes and maybe things would change. Some were afraid that if they took a public stand they would jeopardise their visas here.
Spies might inform on them in their own countries and their families be harassed.

“They had been sent away for a safe future, they were carrying all their families’ hopes,” Robin Laurie said.

They were burdened with expectation. “It’s like the Golden Mountain that the Chinese talked about centuries ago. The streets were paved with gold...It was a sense that they would be free; maybe not rich but free and safe.”

Chinese migrants who came to Australia during the gold rush from the 1850s referred to this country’s gold fields as the New Gold Mountain. California was the Old Gold Mountain. The first Chinese miners stepped quietly ashore at Port Melbourne and jogged single-file to the city, lugging belongings in baskets suspended from bamboo poles. Soon so many arrived that charter ships docked at Robe River, in South Australia, to avoid a poll tax imposed to discourage Chinese miners landing in Victorian ports. The miners walked hundreds of kilometres to the goldfields. “A lot of families had gone into debt or gathered their savings from their extended families,” Robin Laurie said of those who crossed the water a century and-a-half later.

Fahim had taught himself English in the detention centres and spoke out eloquently at the rallies outside Melbourne Town Hall. But he could not continue. Robin Laurie believed he shared with other young asylum seekers a sense of responsibility knowing their families borrowed large amounts of money to make their flight to freedom possible. This was “a weight on their heads”.

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Delays in processing applications to remain in Australia were causing “immeasurable mental suffering and material disadvantage,” according to a report on a study by RMIT University’s Centre for Applied Social Research. Its authors said the findings of the study featuring 39 men and 12 women from Iraq, Iran, Sudan, Eritrea, Egypt, Somalia, Syria and Afghanistan, “illustrate a clear and unequivocal connection between the visa status of refugees on (three-year) temporary protection visas and their self-reported feelings of distress, despair and depression.” “The deep uncertainty associated with the TPV severely restricts the capacity of refugee participants to recover from a traumatic past, as well as to dream and to
hope for a better future,” they said.

I reported on the RMIT report days before its release in June 2003. Research fellow Dr Greg Marston said at the time the asylum seekers had high expectations of rights and freedom on their release from detention centres between 1999 and 2002. But once they realised the restrictions of their visas and continued uncertainty on their future, “there was a sense in which they had a big crash”. “We were very happy because we thought we’re finished and were out of prison,” one man said, “but unfortunately we found ourselves in . . . an open prison.”

The study found barriers to employment and health services as well as what it terms “time torture” in enforced uncertainty. It said many refugees, living in what they described as “secondary detention”, were denied a range of government settlement services, including the English tuition offered to refugees with permanent protection visas. The researchers found accounts of discrimination by real estate agents, employers and health professionals. TPV holders were treated less favourably than other jobseekers by Centrelink. “Refugees on TPVs have endured intolerable situations in their home country, a dangerous journey to Australia, unspeakable conditions in detention centres and now they must live with limited freedom and entitlements despite having met the criteria of a ‘genuine refugee’ under United Nations guidelines,” the study said. “In light of this legacy of pain and punishment it is not surprising that many refugees are struggling to cope with the stress and mental anguish of being defined as a ‘temporary citizen’.” Some participants revealed a sense of shame at being labelled “TPV” or “illegal refugee”. They believed the Government was punishing them.

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Fahim Fayazi was born in the village of Bustaid in Gazni province in central Afghanistan - the mountainous “Hazarajat”, home of the Hazara people. “I always wanted, desperately, to receive an education, but there was no school in the village,” he said in the statement read on his behalf by Arif on occasion. “Instead, when I was eight years old I became a shepherd. I looked after a flock of 15 sheep and goats. “When I was 15, the Russians occupied Afghanistan. The Hazara people managed to get some autonomy. The elders were able to establish a school for their children. So, at the age of 15, I held a pen in my hand for the first time. I went to school for nearly six years.”
He was 21 when he left home in 1994 with “a small amount of money my father had given me”. He travelled alone to the Pakistani city of Quetta. “I did not know their language or culture. I was always getting fleeced. I got a false visa for Iran but then I had to pay a people smuggler some money and they took me to Tehran by bus and I began yet another new life.” He’d laboured on construction sites mostly in the holy city of Qom, south west of Tehran. “After three years things were getting bad for Hazara people. We were often stopped and checked by police...So I went to the Australian consulate in Tehran. The consulate people told me to write to the Australian embassy in Greece. They wrote back and told me to go to the UNHCR office in Tehran.

“I was arrested by security guards near the UNHCR building. They turned me over to the Iranian police. I spent three months in an Iranian jail. I was released and deported back to Afghanistan. I was captured by the Taliban and jailed again for three months in the southern city of Kandahar. I was tortured and forced to do hard labour. I saw a lot of suffering ...

When I was released I returned to my village. I had been away for three and-a-half years. My mother did not recognise me. I had lost many kilos in weight. I stayed there for two years...But the Taliban began to kidnap young Hazara men from our village and send them to the front line. It was time to escape again. This time I went further.”

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We know something of Fahim’s story because he chose to share it even when he could not speak for himself. We know it because Arif (and on occasion another man involved in the production) stepped up to give a voice to his friend, despite his own struggles.

Zable based the character known as ‘The Walker’ on Arif. In “dark times” when Arif was threatened with deportation, Zable would sometimes walk the streets of Fitzroy with him. “Each tread helps me live another step,” Majid Shokor would sound the lines Zable had written of the Afghan Hazara who had by then heard from his wife that two of their children had died. “Yet, no matter how far I walk, how many streets go by, how many hours flow by, I cannot obliterate the faces of my loved ones.”

In a note to his co-writers, Arnold Zable wrote of “just an experiment which could be turned into a role for Alice Garner, the Hermes type character who fills in the gaps, wherever they may be, conveys information in a poetic way, links various tales together”. What he termed
the piece, 'The Walker', which begins with the line 'I Walk Because I Cannot Sleep, “could be woven into the script as a kind of recurring chant, with multiple voices and so on”. “This piece could also be seen as conveying both the terrors from which people are fleeing, but also, their nostalgia for the past, for childhood, and their appreciation of the integrity and grandeur of the ancient cultures of the home country. We set out to encourage both the stories of the past and the specific chain of events that caused the asylum seeker to escape and to embark on perilous journeys, to emerge in the workshops. This included the alternation between the darker and lighter aspects of the past, both the celebration and lament, rather than mere darkness, and a mere sense of victimhood.”

Zable remembered his first encounters with Arif and other asylum seekers in 2000. This, he said, was probably “the literal knock on the door” – a challenge to activism on their behalf. “Arif was extraordinarily open...He was willing to sit down with you, to walk with you. Our relationship had a lot to do with walking. We would walk sometimes. I remember one particular evening, when we walked for several hours and he was expressing his distress and his sense of deepening frustration at being left in limbo, on a temporary protection visa, isolated from his loved ones, and with seemingly little hope of receiving permanent refuge.”

Zable mentioned an article he once wrote about Arif. It appeared in The Age in January 2001, and was headlined, ‘I am Detainee CA120’. “That was Arif’s number in the Woomera Detention Centre,” he said. “The article begins with Arif walking the streets of the city. Whenever he saw a mother or a family with a child he’d feel sick because he’d think of his own children. He left behind baby twins and a daughter. He found out a year later, that two of them had died.

“With Arif from the beginning it was friendship. There was a sense that we were working together, and there was a sense that this was a man with a very open mind. Arif moved easily into the Fitzroy Learning Network ambience. He mixed easily with people of many backgrounds. He was a natural leader of his own people. ... When we had to make speeches in the back yard (of the Napier Street building) invariably Arif would get up to talk on behalf of his fellow asylum seekers. I would visit him in his thirteenth floor apartment in the Fitzroy high-rise Housing Commission flats. Through him I met many other Hazara refugees and began to relate to that community.”

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Arnold Zable was the first Jew Majid Shokor met. “It is quite strange,” said the actor, who has since travelled to Israel and met with exiled Iraqi Jewish musicians while collaborating with Australian filmmaker Marsha Emerman on the 2015 documentary, On the Banks of the Tigris: the hidden story of Iraqi music. “People talk about differences. Then you see such beautiful delicate human beings like Arnold and the others in front of you. I have this question, why is the world mad, really? Because here we are; like meeting Arnold or any Jewish person the whole conflict doesn't make sense. You can't comprehend.

“In a way you feel very, very sad that people divide people based on their race or religion when there are so many similarities to other humans. It also made me angry towards Saddam's regime, the Arab nationalism ideology, to portray the Jews in a demonised way. People are killed in the name of this conflict just to reinforce the position of power and that's all. The play (Kan Yama Kan) created the sense of a family. Now we visit Arnold. Arnold visits us. We have some Iranian friends; some Afghans. I met people I hadn't met before; and the others the same.”

Majid Shokor rolled up a shirt sleeve at my request to show where he was shot in the left arm in a demonstration in the city of Najaf, 160km or so south of Baghdad, in March 1991 uprisings against Saddam Hussein. The wound was a dough-like twist, as if someone has plucked a pinch of flesh so long and so hard it hadn’t settled back.

He lamented “the silence from the Western world” in the brutal response to the 1991 uprising in which thousands of unarmed civilians were reportedly killed by troops. “The situation was ready in Iraq for people to stand and demand change,” Majid said. “It was a moral and political obligation on people like the elder president Bush. They let Saddam use his forces to crush the uprising and have this mass murdering genocide.”

We’d met on a hot summer day under the clock tower. I’d wrongly assumed the wound was inflicted in combat during his decade in the Iraqi army. Majid was undergoing a year and nine months’ compulsory military service when Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980 and he found himself caught up in a war that lasted until 1989. “I was in the Army for 10 years...The whole thing was hell. I had to stay there. We had no choice.”
Onstage in *Kan Yama Kan*, he’d pace as a condemned man might, measuring the confines of a cell. “I walk because I cannot sleep,” the actor recited his lines. “I walk because I cannot sit. I walk because I cannot stand still. I walk because if I don't walk, I will die…”

He was fifth eldest of nine children – three girls and six boys. Their father, a public transport ticket seller, died in 1974. His mother, three brothers and three sisters were still in Iraq when we met in early 2010. He had visited them the previous year. “I supported the military action against Saddam's regime although I knew that my family was living in Baghdad. They are still living there. And that may put them in great danger. But I supported the military action and I still think it is the right thing to do.”

He’d been “the entertainer boy” in his family. His mother was a strong influence. She’d finished high school at a time when it was unusual for an Iraqi girl. She was interested in art and reading and encouraged him. His father was still alive, and proud as he watched him perform in a primary school play in which he wore his boy scout uniform and took the part of an Israeli soldier. “The attitude was as long as you make the Palestinians glorious people who are going to prevail at the end that's fine.”

Not only was his father there but the manager of the educational region. “It was quite a big crowd. I was really scared.”

His widowed mother took the family to Najaf in 1976. “Although it's a very conservative city, the theatre scene was very, very vibrant there. So I saw my first play there onstage and I was really blown away by the whole situation. So I thought, 'Yeah I'm going to do theatre'.”

Though he went on to win the best actor award at the Iraqi youth theatre festival in 1978, his application to study drama was rejected. “You had to have a recommendation from a Baath party member to study either at the drama school or the education school. I didn't have anyone who supported me in that. So they said you have to study accounting instead.”

He completed a diploma in accounting from the Babylon Technical Institute in 1979 and went into the army. An elder brother left Iraq in 1980 and “we would get a lot of night and dawn visits from the authorities...” His brother died in Lebanon. “I think he got killed by the
Baathists. There was a strong cooperation between the party and the PLO and I think they assassinated him.”

Majid acted in plays in the early 1990s including The Key, by Yusuf Al-Ani, a response to the defeat against Israel in the 1967 Six Day War at Baghdad’s second Arabic Theatre Festival. He was a member of the Iraqi National Theatre Company when he finally found a way out of Iraq in 1995. A friend in Jordan arranged for an invitation from the Jordanian actors’ union. He was among a few actors supposedly invited to take part in a TV series about Saddam. He laughed at the absurdity. He put himself at risk by refusing to take roles that praised Saddam. “We had to pay some money to bribe someone. They gave us papers and they stamped our passports. We took the bus from Baghdad to the Jordanian border.”

His wife Eman and daughters, Sarah and Touka followed him to the Jordanian capital, Amman. “We had a really hard time. At that time the Iraqi intelligence forces had a strong relationship with the Jordanian government. We tried to have an organisation for Iraqi writers, artists, intellectuals and we applied to the Jordanian interior ministry. They encouraged us to work but they didn't guarantee our safety. They said, ‘You can work but we can't guarantee anything’.” Then came a call from someone inside the ministry to say the Iraqi embassy in Amman had a list of their names. “They started to arrest people from the group and interrogated its president. We had no choice but to leave.”

In Kan Yama Kan, Majid’s heels sounded hard on the stage as he paced back and forth. “Listen to the echo of my feet,” he'd recite his lines. “Each step blocks out my thoughts. Each tread helps me live another step. Yet, no matter how far I walk, how many streets go by, how many hours flow by, I cannot obliterate the faces of my loved ones...”

After a year in Amman, Majid took his family to Damascus only to find fellow Iraqis, troubled by Syrian authorities, the expatriates looking further afield. “They were talking about a new route to Europe or Australia. You could fly to India and then to Indonesia and then take a boat to Australia. And then later on, they started saying the Australian government is putting people in jail. I said, ‘This is nonsense. There is no way Australia can do that.’ But they kept talking about it. And then later they talked about some messages being sent by the Australian government to people in Indonesia and some other places: Don't come because you can't survive the ocean. There's a lot of sharks. If you can survive the ocean
you can’t survive the Australian desert. There’s a lot of snakes. They were creating this fear among asylum seekers. I heard all of that and I couldn’t believe it.”

The talk continued among Iraqis in Syria “because this is the hot subject: how to leave Syria and go to this place or that place”. People he knew found it hard to believe they would be rejected in Australia. They heard it was a country that respected human rights. “But some of them said, ‘Even jail in Australia is much better than here’.”

His wife and children went on to Lebanon and he followed, finding work as a school drama teacher. “I had very little information about Australia at the time...A friend of mine who came here performing said it was a very, very beautiful place, multicultural and the weather was very nice. So I thought it would be good.”

Three years after he applied at the Australian embassy, he was finally told he and his family had been accepted. “You feel you are really safe at last,” he remembered the telephone call. They flew into Melbourne at night nine months later on September 25, 2001 – a fortnight after 9/11. “It was very quiet. This was quite strange because we came from places where cities sometimes don’t sleep and there is a lot of noise around you; a lot of life.”

He was learning English at AMES when he heard of a theatre production involving refugees. “One of the volunteers teaching us English... said, ‘What did you do in Iraq?’ I said, ‘I was an actor’. He said, ‘No, you should say, I am an actor’ because you should work here. He told me about Carmel Davies and I met her. Carmel introduced me to Robin Laurie and we had a meeting. That was my audition.”

As he’d pace onstage through Kan Yama Kan, you might have thought he was reflecting on his own predicament. “I walk because I want the night to end,” he’d say. “I walk because I cannot sleep. I walk because I cannot return to my dreams. I walk because I hate the night.”

But he was an actor, playing a part, based on another man’s story. “Arnold (Zable) wrote about his situation very beautifully,” he said of the character referred to as The Walker. “It was almost like a poem.”

Majid Shokor’s experience then was significantly different to other fugitives with whom he would share a stage. Unlike them, he had his family with him, access to the 510 hours of language classes and permanent residence. Unlike the TPV holders, he did not face a threat
of forced return. “That gave me a lot of comfort. I could rebuild a new life for myself and my family.”

Not that he had any difficulty empathising with the other players. “I was in the same situation before coming to Australia. But of course when you looked at them and when you see the desperate situation, you’d feel like you are in a way privileged or the lucky one…”

Onstage, he told us about a beautiful city on a river called the Tigris. He told us about a street named for a famous poet who “wrote about women and alcohol.” There were live fish in Baghdad’s restaurants. You’d choose the one you wanted and watch them cut it along the back, not the belly as they do here. They’d place the fish in a circle around the fire. You’d sit and watch it cook.

As he spoke, a young girl held a placard. She was just five when she fled Turkey with her Kurdish father. They crossed the mountains on a horse up to its belly in snow. Now, just a few years later, she stood alongside a man from Bagdad, showing a rough sketch of the Iraqi capital’s river, buildings, cars. “Now just along here is the government palace and nobody can walk there,” Majid told us. “There are still a few restaurants. They are owned by Iraqi intelligence. What do they cook now? Maybe you don’t want to know!”

Women would go down to the river that cut a city in half and light a candle for their “sons or daughters or husbands or fathers who have gone away or disappeared”. They’d put the candle on the water and watch it float away. If it remained alight there was some hope the loved one was alright. It did not bode so well if the flickering light died.

“My mother lights one now on the Tigris for me,” the actor told the audience.

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The players lifted a curtain on their lives. They stepped onstage in the hope that their stories would help ease indifference. People would understand what they had endured and surely act with compassion.

A softly spoken man with neat moustache, his grey hair swept back, warily took the small audiences that came to see the show from happy times with 11 brothers and sisters in Baghdad to precarious years as a Shiite in Saddam’s Iraq and in exile in Iran. Adil Alsafi stood stiffly at first, arms at his side, then placed one hand in the other as if fingering a ring. He’d
had his misgivings when Carmel Davies encouraged him to take part in the play. “In the beginning I made mistakes and I was very shy... I told the teacher that I am shy. I can't. But also, I can't talk English. She told me, ‘Adil, you have two languages - Arabic and Farsi - and a little English. Why are you shy?’”

Adil spent the Muslim fast month of Ramadan in Adelaide after his release from Woomera in 2000 and come to Melbourne to live with a friend in Brunswick Street, Fitzroy. Someone at the nearby Brotherhood of St Laurence’s Ecumenical Migration Centre told him they were offering English lessons at Fitzroy Learning Network. The network in Napier Street was just a short walk away. Davies was one of his first language teachers at the centre.

He might have been among the least confident, but told an evocative anecdote. I’d featured his childhood reminiscences of kite-flying after Friday night meals with his parents and siblings at the start of a newspaper report before opening night in July 2002. “Boys fly many kites from the rooftops,” he’d tell the audience. “Sometimes at night I would take two or three small candles and put them in small boxes on the kite and fly in the dark: very beautiful.”

Adil fled to Iran with his then wife after police arrested his father and he was told they were looking for him. His father died in jail. “In Iran I start from zero and I built everything, like before,” he told the audience. “But still, no passport, no citizenship, no peace of mind. If you are an Iraqi in Iran, you are always a stranger. You are always waiting to leave Iran. One and-a-half million Iraqis waiting for Saddam to go; waiting to return to Iraq. Then Iranian Government says, ‘You must return to your country, we cannot look after and-a-half million Iraqis and two million Afgani anymore’. I had to go.”

His is the story of a second crossing. Adil risked his life twice in a decade in flimsy boats and twice faced indefinite periods in detention to remain here. While most Kan Yama Kan players made a home in Melbourne after eventually securing permanent residence and citizenship, the Baghdad-born entrepreneur who first came here in late 1999, grew weary of waiting in the months of uncertainty after the visa deadline expired and returned to his family in Tehran, via Syria and Iraq in 2005. Five years on, he was back again.

It seemed a small miracle. You must talk to Adil, I was told at a party in north east suburban Melbourne in support of the family of another Kan Yama Kan player whose close relative
was killed in Syria. I didn’t get a chance to say hello but decided I would get in touch with him.

I knew that some of the thousands who came in that era had returned but no-one else who came back to Australia again. Neither did Adil. Had he met anyone else who came a second time? “No, no,” he said when we met in Melbourne’s Federation Square on a grey, autumn day in 2014, “just me.”

He’d gone back in time to attend the wedding of his daughter, Azhar (“like flowers in Arabic,” he’d translate), entering Iran illegally. In his tradition it was right and proper that a father be there for his daughter, he said. Azhar, in her early twenties, had gone with her husband to live somewhere in Europe before returning to Iran. Adil and his wife had separated. She was still in Iran.

Adil first made it to Australia after a 13-day voyage from Bali with 135 others on a 22-metre boat that was apprehended near Darwin in December, 1999. Almost a decade later, he was among 65 who spent about a week on the water from Jakarta before reaching Christmas Island in October 2010. He’d paid $8000 for the trip.

“When I came by boat again it made me very tired,” he told me. “I still have a problem with my leg because for four or five days in the ocean I was not moving, just sleeping. It was very, very hard and my face was on fire because of the water the ocean and the sun.”

Detainees on Christmas Island where he spent a year or so, “told me, ‘You are crazy...It’s very hard. It's very dangerous. Why are you coming second time’?”

Immigration officials were surprised. “I had some document, some writing...that I had been in Australia before. This was the second time I was coming. I talked to immigration at the interview and told them. They asked me, ‘What's happened? Why have you come back? Why are you coming again?’ I told them my story.

“In the beginning they didn't accept me. They told me we can’t. It made me very sad and sick for a long time. I was transferred to Darwin and I was waiting. I talked to my lawyer, my case manager. I asked what was happening, why I was waiting a long time.”

He gained permanent residence in November 2011.
We sat on a cold concrete seat on Flinders Street until it rained, then carried on talking under shelter. But though he was unsure of his English, we eased into conversation.

“Me? 21.” He laughed when I asked his age. “That's my age,” I said, touching my grey beard. “I'll tell you a story. I said I was on the train the other day and a young woman offered me her seat and I said, 'I don't need your seat, I am a young man!’”

Adil laughed: “I'm just joking. I am 54.”

He’d enjoyed the camaraderie at Fitzroy Learning Network and in Kan Yama Kan. “At that time I had a lot of friends coming and talking with me and we had a nice time. It was a good time. We would talk about why the government gave a temporary visa for refugees. At that time John Howard was Prime Minister. I was waiting for a long time and very worried about my family and my future and I didn't know how long I would wait like this. It made me very worried and I thought that I would go back and help my family.”

Crossing the border into Iran from Iraq with the help of a people smuggler, he made it back in time for his daughter’s wedding but only to find life in Tehran as precarious as ever for an Iraqi exile. “I had the same problem (in Iran) as before and did not have a document. After a few years I came back to Australia.”
CHAPTER NINE

Thirteen months to curtain-up. They were sipping Bintang beer and chatting to Perth footballers near the front bar of a club on the southern Bali village of Kuta. It was October 12 2002. “I remember seeing the flames just flying past me,” one of two women from southeast suburban Melbourne told me. “Just this orange; I can’t describe the noise it made. It was just unbelievable ... the force!” Her cousin, a few years older in her early 30s, felt as though she was drowning in noise as the fireball from the entrance towards the main club area narrowly missed them - “... like yelling out in water”. They were among 240 injured in the blasts that killed 202 people. Black marks would appear on the cousins’ skin as shrapnel emerged from their flesh. The older of the two had glass removed from her left foot; she couldn’t hear with her left ear, despite another operation, to repair the eardrum. Headaches and sleeplessness plagued the younger woman for months. Some days she did not want to get out of bed in the morning, go outside, or speak to anyone.

Days after the bomb attack in Bali, the Kan Yama Kan cast was due onstage near the Victorian Arts Centre in an old Belgian tent salon of a kind once found in the fairgrounds and festivals of Europe. Before taking to the stage, Michael Aboujundi had a word with director Robin Laurie. He had something to say about what had happened in Bali.

The production had evolved as it toured city, suburbs and country Victoria. “I would probably say in a lot of traditions, even in Shakespeare, the action and the words weren’t precisely scripted,” Robin Laurie explained, “and there was probably room, like there was in the different versions of Kan Yama Kan to adapt to current events…”

The crowd filled the Famous Spiegeltent. The punters sat among velvet canopies in private booths or wooden chairs on a gleaming, teak dance floor. Some hung back at the bar. Light in cut-glass windows spilled on faces in the framed mirror glass. The ornate “tent” seemed to be a carousel that might suddenly spin and spin, pushing patrons in private booths back against wood and velvet.

Michael read a message “from asylum seekers still in Woomera detention centre to the Australian people”. Eighty eight Australians were among the dead in Bali. “We feel regret in relation to the bombing tragedy,” Michael told the audience in the travelling venue that
spent part of each year outside the arts centre, “and would like to express our condolences to all Australian people, especially to the family members of those who lost their lives and to the Australian government. Also we hope that we never see or hear of such a tragedy around the world again.”

He continued: “We the refugees and temporary protection visa holders in Kan Yama Kan have the same feeling and we want to have one minute’s silence to honour and remember the lives of all those killed and injured in the Bali bombing....and for all other innocent victims of senseless violence around the world.”

Two years had passed since a bus took Michael across the countryside to a strange city, from a place from which he once longed to see something more than “just the dirt and a few dead trees”. “I had a lot of communication with people in Woomera at the time. I used to send them the newspaper articles published here about the situation of the refugees and detainees.”

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Michael told the Spiegeltent audience that others held in Sydney’s Villawood centre had released a similar message. I heard much the same message for Bali victims one Saturday afternoon that month at a park in a north suburban suburb at a memorial service to commemorate the first anniversary of the deaths of more than 350 asylum seekers who drowned when the overcrowded Indonesian fishing boat that came to be known as SIEV (suspected illegal entry vessel) X, capsized and sank on its way to Christmas Island. One hundred and fifty children were among 354 to die. The figure is commonly reported as 353 but organisers of the memorial at a park in the suburb 12km north of the city remembered also the unborn child of a pregnant woman who drowned.

Among those at the event, Amal Hassan Basry, who with her 18 year-old son Rami was one of 44 survivors, wept as she described their ordeal before being rescued by an Indonesian fishing vessel. Rami, clutching a piece of wood to stay afloat, kissed her goodbye, convinced that they too would die. Amal Basry would die of breast cancer in Melbourne’s St Vincent’s Public Hospital less than five years after surviving the sinking of SIEVX. She was just 52. She and her son, Rami, were granted permanent residence the previous year.
What motivated Michael to deliver the message to the audience that night about the Bali bombing? “They were innocent people. They were just caught up in that violent act. They were just human beings like everyone else. I thought why don’t we do this? This is how it should be.”

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Alice Garner told audiences at some performances of “another connection”. “The wife of an Iranian detainee in Woomera was still in Indonesia with their two children. She died...as a result of the Bali bombing...” Thirty five year-old Ibrahim Sammaki-Hassan-Kiadeh, was given permission to leave Woomera to visit his Javanese wife, Endang, after she was critically burnt in the bombings. She died before he could reach her. Their children, Safdar, 7, and Sara, 3, were left in the care of their impoverished grandmother. Garner and Majid Shokor enacted a scene on the sinking of the boat, Garner telling of a “modern day Sinbad”, Aluomer Zanalabadin, who arrived in Australia by boat in September 1999, and was granted a three-year protection visa after a year in the Curtin detention centre. “Listen carefully,” she said. “Towards the middle of 2001, Aluomer had learnt that his wife and mother had arrived in Jakarta. They were looking for a boat to make the final run to Australia. “Aluomer pleaded with them, by phone, 'It is too dangerous', he’d said.” “Aluomer's wife and mother decided to risk their lives in a flimsy fishing boat rather than remain apart from their loved one,” Garner told us. “But, Aluomer could not bear the thought of them taking the boat journey unprotected and alone. So he flew to Indonesia on July 13 last year. On Friday October 19 Aluomer, with his wife and mother boarded an overcrowded leaking fishing boat in Sumatra. All three were among the 353 asylum seekers who drowned when the boat sank, later that day, in the Java Sea, en route to Australia.”

As she continued, Kurdish musician Dursan Acar played a gentle accompaniment on his seven-string baglama. “For many hours the survivors clung to bits of wood, to whatever they could. And it was Indonesian fishermen who, finally, answered their call. Kan Yama Kan. Come closer, my dear friends. Listen carefully. We do not intend to upset you. But the truth is very painful. And the story must be told. On such perilous journeys, some make it, and some don’t....”

Candles were lit for each of the drowned. “Our story does not end here. Ahmed Alzalimi is an asylum seeker from Iraq, on a temporary protection visa, living in Sydney. His wife,
Sondos Ismael, and three beautiful daughters, whom he last saw three years earlier, were on that boat. Sondos survived, but she lost her three daughters: Eman, 8 years old; Zahra, aged 6; little Fatimah, aged five and Sondos’ sister, Khadija. Even after the loss of her three daughters, the Australian government did not allow Ahmed to fly to Jakarta to be with his wife without losing his visa. Yes, weep for Fatimah, Zahra, Eman and Khadija. Weep for Aluomer Zanalabadden and his wife and mother. Weep for the grieving mothers, and father, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters.”

Four pairs of shoes were placed onstage – three for the children and one for their mother. The candles lit, Majid Shokor narrated in Arabic; a Kurdish Iraqi high school biology teacher, in Persian. Garner went on: “Weep for the 353 Iraqi, Iranian and Afghan asylum seekers who drowned on that crowded boat. Weep for the innocent victims of senseless violence throughout the world. Weep for the countless modern day Sinbads who are still in search of freedom, living lives in limbo, lives suspended between many worlds.”

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Onstage, Lisa Maza explained some of the conditions on which asylum seekers were being released into the Australian community. They would not be allowed to bring their families here or visit them. If they left, they would not be allowed to return. “They have no right to English classes, no settlement support and get no help to find jobs. They are sentenced to years of confusion and uncertainty, health problems and insecurity.”

Maza was born in Brisbane in January 1967, months before the May referendum in which Australians voted to count Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in the national population census. “When I was born I wasn’t even a citizen of this country,” she’d tell me.

“You know, over 3000 Afghans came through the desert here with the camels in the 1800s,” Lisa Maza told Kan Yama Kan audiences. “A lot of them had kids with Aboriginal women, stayed on and had families. There’s the Mohamed family down at port Augusta, the Khans, the Bijohs. I still remember my grandpa with his turban, his baggy pants – he used to pray five times a day... Now they’ve got all those Afghans locked up over there at Woomera – could be some of our cousins in that mob.”

Did she have an Afghan forbear? “That was a character,” Maza explained. “A lot of people were confused about that. I am an actor.”
Before *Kan Yama Kan* could begin, Maza paid respect to the traditional owners of the land on which the performance took place. “The attitudes that led to the persecution, the slaughter and the incarceration of indigenous people of Australia, that took our land from us, stole our children and made us non-citizens in our own country for almost 200 years are the same attitudes that exist today,” Maza told audiences, “that keep these people and their children imprisoned behind razor wire and deny them a safe place to live in peace with their family.”

Until *Kan Yama Kan*, she said when I visited her in her small flat in Melbourne’s inner west, she had not met an asylum seeker. “I had had nothing to do with refugees before the play.”

She and her sister, Rachael, artistic director of the Melbourne-based Ilbijerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Cooperative, are well-known in the theatre community. Their father, actor, playwright and political activist Bob Maza, founded Australia’s first national indigenous theatre company. Their mother, Vera, was seven when her family came to Australia from Holland.

The Maza family spent four years in Melbourne before moving to Sydney. “I remember when we were younger when we first moved to Sydney we lived in Redfern for like six months and I do remember us being chased every day by white racist kids. I think when there are more blackfellas in a town you do get more racism. I've travelled a lot around Australia touring and when there are larger populations - the more threatening black people are - the more racism there is.

“We grew up in nice areas. I suppose mum kind of wanted us to be away from the racism and all the shit that she had seen since being with Dad. Mum being a recent arrival experienced racism but when she hooked up with Dad and they travelled around she experienced a very different kind of racism, one she had never experienced before. She was with a black man. It was very threatening for white men especially. She wanted us to live somewhere where there were more opportunities. We grew up in Woollahra and Paddington and there was still racism there. People are just racist; boys especially. You just get called abo, coon, nigger, boong, black blah-blah, whatever. It goes on and on but that’s just commonplace.”
We’d discussed a newspaper survey that showed few Australians wanted asylum seekers here. “It’s a real fear,” Maza said. “It’s something to do with Australia’s history and how Australia was invaded by very mean and ungenerous people. I do think that. They didn’t want to be here. They feared this wild land with these savages who weren’t even worth talking about or giving any credence to...You hear people on the television - oh God I was shocked to hear from people who had only arrived sometime in the past 200 years or even last two decades – saying about the newest people arriving, “they come here, why don’t they adapt to our way of life?” It’s like, yeah, like you adapted when you came?”

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**Five months to curtain-up.** Friday June 20, 2003. Julian Burnside told guests in the elegant gold-, red and pink-toned Victorian parliamentary dining room the distressing story of a couple in their thirties who fled Iran in late 2000 with their two young daughters because they were members of a “small quasi-Christian sect” whose persecution he likened to the experience of Jews in Nazi Germany and Poland. He told the audience at the World Refugee Day event and their flight “was triggered by a terrible event, the details of which are too terrible to relate at a function like this”. Burnside spoke of the deterioration in Woomera in the condition in particular of the elder of two daughters, who was 10 at the time. The family remained in detention for another year after she hanged herself while her parents and seven-year-old sister were at dinner and tried to swallow shampoo after she was taken down “because she had seen adults kill themselves that way in Woomera”.

Burnside mentioned that while in London recently, Geoffrey Robertson, QC, had introduced him to several European lawyers as “the barrister who acted for the Tampa asylum seekers”. “It took me a couple of minutes to recognise the significance of the fact that his introduction was immediately comprehensible to them: they all knew about the Tampa episode and the stain it made on Australia’s national image,” he told the audience at Victorian State Parliament that day. “In recent months, Australia’s human rights record has been criticised by the South African judiciary. Less than 30 years ago, most Australians would have been ashamed to think that South Africa would criticise our human rights record.”
Later, Burnside would unsuccessfully try to interest a newspaper journalist in asserts in his Refugee Day address. He has written of a journalist who rang him, “sheepishly”**, as he recalled it, to say an editor had decided against a news story he had suggested. He wrote of an *Age* journalist – I was with the Sunday paper at the time. But unless he had an almost identical exchange with someone from the daily paper, the sheepish journalist was me.

At the time, I’d make a point of taking at least one story idea – possibly more – on asylum seekers to Tuesday morning news conferences for *The Sunday Age*. We were a small staff with much to cover. When I raised Burnside’s suggested story at a Tuesday news conference at which we would pitch ideas for the Sunday paper, the editor told me it was “rhetoric”. He subsequently reassured me he was not trying to discourage coverage of the issue. It was important. I came to the following week’s conference with another proposal: I would write a feature on the closure of this country’s most infamous detention centre and its impact? The editor agreed. I suggested accompanying an ex-detainee back to Woomera. He was open to this at first but later decided against it. The story ran prominently weeks later. It was headed: “A scar is borne”. The feature was prefaced: “Woomera's detention centre is in mothballs, but the pain of its existence will leave a mark on the inmates and the nation ...”

“I was very critical of the press in their coverage of the issue, because they regularly distorted the facts,” he told me when I visited him and his artist wife, Kate Durham, at their home in east suburban Melbourne one weekend afternoon in early 2010. “It was really hard to get a good-news, pro-refugee story in the press.”

Not until news broke that Australian permanent resident, German citizen Cornelia Rau was unlawfully detained for 10 months in 2004 and 2005 was there “a change in thinking”. “Then you couldn’t open a newspaper without seeing refugee stories,” Burnside said. “If you get an order from the court, closing the court to journalists, they rush off and try to get the order lifted. Just so they can see what they’re not supposed to be looking at. No journalist ever challenged the (Immigration) Department or ACM for its rule that journalists couldn't go into detention centres. I think that tells you a whole lot. The journalists never took on the Government saying by what right do you exclude us? Woomera is a long way away but Maribyrnong is on your doorstep.”

He spoke of pervasive negative, anti-asylum seeker coverage in the Murdoch press. “They kept on calling them ‘illegals’. They kept on swallowing the Government's line, no matter
how often they were corrected, even by the Press Council. They kept doing it. This is my
theory. It may be wrong. But I got the clear impression that access to government was
contingent on the sort of things you wrote. And people who took the unpopular, pro-asylum
seeker line would simply lose their access.”

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I’d heard mention of Burnside and Durham in late 2002. Refugee film maker Hadi Mahood,
who endured years in a desert camp on the Saudi border after fleeing Iraq until permitted to
settle in Australia in 1995, named the couple among people without whom he would not
have made a documentary on the SIEVX disaster. Mahood didn’t say how – only that they
were among those who made it possible to make the film that took its title, Sindbads, from
a hero in The Thousand and One Nights who survived shipwrecks and other adversity on
seven sea voyages.

Later I’d hear of Burnside’s activism from Labor MP Richard, Wynne, who would become
State Planning Minister in the Andrews Government. “Now there is a really fascinating guy
where you go, what is this incredibly successful corporate lawyer doing sitting on the floor
at the network with me and others just listening to people?” said Wynne, who grew up in
the Fitzroy area, youngest of a waterside worker’s nine children. “He has done extraordinary
things. He and his wife Kate took enormous risks. They moved not just out of their comfort
zone but went to some other place....”

When I visited the couple at their home in east suburban Melbourne one Sunday afternoon
in early 2010, Burnside told me some people regarded him as “a class traitor” when he
acted for the Maritime Union of Australia against Patrick Stevedores in the 1998 waterfront
dispute. “Which is ridiculous,” he told me, “because the cab rank principle at the bar says
that if you are offered the brief and you are available, you take it. You are not there to judge
the client...”

The barrister noted the irony that some of the people who at one stage “crossed the road to
avoid me”, later wrote flattering letters after he received an award for his work for
refugees. None had expressed concern when it became widely known that he was receiving
death threats during the Tampa crisis. “Not one of them ever asked if I was feeling all right.”

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Burnside had acted as counsel for the civil liberties organisation, Liberty Victoria, for the Tampa asylum seekers and for some Woomera escapees. He and Durham established the Spare Rooms for Refugees campaign that helped more than 100 people find accommodation. They first opened their doors to Uighur woman from northwest China, then others from the Hazara community. The couple would coordinate a letter-writing campaign to hundreds of detainees on Nauru. Burnside voted for Liberal Party until 1996. He has written*** that he decided the then government could not be trusted while acting for the maritime union and lost all faith in the party over their treatment of asylum-seekers. Not that he had gone over to the other side of politics. “While I have been critical of the Howard government, I have not forgotten that Labor introduced mandatory detention, and supported most of the major pieces of anti-terror legislation without attempting to moderate their ill-considered effects on civil liberties.”

Lara McKinley, a photographer engaged by various activist groups to handle their media, saw Burnside in action in a north Victorian town in May 2003 for a regional conference of the group, Rural Australians for Refugees. It was in a small red-brick building in Kerang that she saw Julian Burnside in action, questioning guest politicians. “He gave quite an amusing cross-examination of (then Shadow Immigration Minister) Julia Gillard and we were all chuckling,” McKinley recalled.

Federal Liberal MP Sharman Stone had declined an invitation but the Nationals’ John Forrest, for Mallee, was there. “Oh my God, I still get chills thinking about it… Burnside concentrated on the fact that John was a Christian. Iranians were in the news at the time. Burnside was talking to him about his Christian values. As he was doing that, you could see the light bulb go off in John Forrest’s head. I saw it. It was like, ‘I think I need to investigate this a bit more’. Then Terry White from RAR in Maryborough stood up. He was really passionate about Iranians who had converted to Christianity and you could just see John Forrest lean forward and say, ‘you have to tell me more’. And from that moment on, he was in discussions with RAR and was one of the first people to publicly speak out for refugees from within the Coalition. He probably has a totally different take on it. But up until then we all thought it was just a hopeless case to try and talk to the Liberal and National parties. …Kerang made a difference.”

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Durham had created a series of paintings depicting the faces of those who died in the October 2001 SIEV-X tragedy. Three hundred and fifty three asylum seekers drowned when their fishing boat sank between Indonesia and Australia. “It was incredibly disruptive and, if you want the truth, I cannot find my way back to where my work was,” she said of the impact of activism at the time. “I hope to goodness that this doesn't sound too self-serving. Artists’ lives are always disrupted by something ... but to be completely honest, I can't find my way back to my own work in a sense, because I can't find any relevance in it.”

When I visited her at home years earlier, in June 2002, she was back from Nauru after she and BBC reporter Sarah Macdonald used hidden cameras to film detainees. Durham told me then of distressing conditions in two camps on the island and complaints of mistreatment on the navy vessel, HMAS Manoora, used to transport hundreds of mostly Afghan asylum seekers from the Norwegian freighter MV Tampa to Nauru where many refused to disembark.

“They are about starving the people,” she said of some of allegations against defence force personnel. “They are about not giving them water, keeping toilets unavailable for them, turning off any heat or air conditioning to get them off... They gave children and mothers, nursing babies and small children, chili so that their lips and throats were burned. The Nauruans told me ... they dragged children away from mothers to get them onto Nauru...”

Durham and Macdonald entered Nauru on a three-day transit permit, avoiding visa restrictions by flying via Auckland, Fiji, Kiribati and the Marshall Islands. A colleague at The Age, Andrew Rule, reported at the time that Durham returned with letters written by detainees, some alleging mistreatment by Australian Defence Force personnel. Detainees were physically and mentally ill from living in filthy conditions caused by a permanent water shortage. Contagious stomach and skin infections were rife and many detainees were very depressed. Drinking water was shipped in from the Solomon Islands.

In the BBC documentary screened that September 29 a detainee with whom Durham had corresponded told Macdonald detainees declined a $2000 Australian government offer to return to Afghanistan. “No-one is willing to take it,” he said. “Because they think that a financial offer cannot solve their problems inside Afghanistan. Our main problem is not financial help - we have security problems in our home.” (iv)
Durham said the man in charge of the International Organisation for Migration on the island was threatening, abusive and “told me I was on my little white horse and who the hell did I think I was ...”

Burnside saw some similarity to Anne Horrigan-Dixon’s activism. “When Tampa happened, Kate was desperate with grief at the idea that Australia could seem so inhospitable, so heartless she went right to the other end of the scale in order to show that we are not like that. Anne I think, did exactly the same thing. She might not have articulated it that way but it looks like the same sort of reaction. So you bend over backwards to try and prove that least to yourself that this place is not as bad as it looks on the surface.”

Horrigan-Dixon, he said, was “the dynamo”. “She was really good at getting people involved in getting them supporting. She was extraordinary.”

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Durham mentioned director Tom Zubrycki’s 2003 documentary, Molly and Mobarak, in which a young Hazara man fell in love with the daughter of the woman who welcomed him into her home in rural New South Wales. “The asylum seekers tended to call everyone ‘mum’ very quickly, which was wonderful cement because people felt, how can you resist that? That was so flattering. But then, at the same time, things got confused because, particularly with Afghans, they were not supposed to talk to women unless they are mums or sisters. So any attachment between the young person and another was confusing for them. They’d fall in love with some of these girls, and sometimes it would go horribly wrong.”

Horrigan-Dixon would present certificates at some parties. “Anne was onto something,” Kate Durham, who is married to Burnside, would recall. “She’d celebrate every minor success. She’d be down at the photocopying machine photocopying certificates and awarding people all the time... She was a real morale booster.”

Anne Horrigan-Dixon could be persuasive. But not everyone she spoke to wanted to hear about desperate strangers who came here on flimsy boats after fleeing their country only to find themselves in wretched camps. “When I first started doing this, I would go to parties and people would almost spit on me,” Horrigan-Dixon said. “They’d not want to talk to me because I would tell them these stories. They would say, ‘We don’t want these people. They
are just queue jumpers’. So I cut a whole lot of people out of my life and a whole lot of good new people came in.”

There’d be food, camaraderie and sometimes song and dance at parties and weekly lunches at which Horrigan-Dixon aimed to foster “a feeling of family and connectedness”. She hoped there’d be an Australian home to welcome each of the TPV holders. To Arnold Zable the parties were “a form of therapy”. “The Kan Yama Kan group had formed close bonds...It was a network of friendships.” Actor Alice Garner saw in this activity a reminder that yes, we could be good to each other after all.

It was at such a party – Horrigan-Dixon reckoned it might have been in late August or early September – that she revealed plans to take the show to the capital. “I remember our backyard was full of people. Julian Burnside was there with Kate and I made a speech and said look, Usama and Mohammad al-Janabi want to take the play to Canberra because they feel if they haven't been there, they haven't give it their best shot to try to turn things around. I said, I have absolutely no idea how we could manage it. But I promise you, somehow or another, we will take this play to Canberra. I don’t know how we will do it but I feel that between all of us here tonight, we can do it.”

Horrigan-Dixon found one in the crowd ready to contribute money to make the trip happen. “Julian Burnside stood up and said, ‘I'm going to give you $5000 and write a check now as a starting point’.”

As Anne Horrigan-Dixon recalled it, after Julian Burnside committed the first few thousand dollars for the Canberra trip at the party, they went to her office and telephoned a man with expertise she believed could make the trip happen. “I said, ‘do you want to be involved?’ And he said, ‘you're on’.”

“Why can't we take it to Canberra?” Michael had asked Mohammad that night in his flat. “Impossible,” his friend replied. Now the prospect of venturing out to tell their stories to political leaders and others was more than just a possibility.
CHAPTER TEN

Two months to curtain-up. Others had gone to the “bush capital” determined to lobby for asylum seekers. Greens leader Bob Brown, Democrats leader Senator Andrew Bartlett and Federal Labor MP and former Western Australian Premier, Dr Carmen Lawrence, were among nine speakers who addressed a group a small crowd outside Parliament House that September 8. This was a “crucial time for campaigning” for permanent protection, one of the organisers of a protest by asylum seekers from Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales backed by the Refugee Action Collective, recalled. The first TPV had expired months earlier. It was a stressful time for those who did not know whether they would be forced to go back to their countries. Three TPV holders met with advisers from the office of Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock, in his last weeks in the portfolio. They’d wanted direct access. “The delegation had hoped to have met with the minister himself. As this did not occur, most of the protesters decided to stay the night in front of Parliament House.”

The delegates had asked the Immigration Minister’s advisers, among other things, to allow five Iraqi families who had spent the past 18 months in Indonesia to join their TPV-holder relatives in Australia. There was a telephone conversation the next day with Shadow Immigration Minister, Nicola Roxon, and an “unexpected and impromptu discussion” with Opposition Leader Simon Crean who told him Labor was opposed to forcing anyone to be sent back and supported moves to have applications processed quicker. The protest was covered on ABC TV, SBS TV and the SBS Arabic radio program and local radio stations; the Canberra Islamic community was supportive. Organisers concluded it was “a great opportunity” to share ideas and plan for further cooperation.

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Mark Madden had parked his car and was on his way to buy vegetables one fine day when he spotted a former colleague. “I looked up and there was Anne who I hadn’t seen in years. She had fortuitously been driving down Station Street, Fairfield, having been told about this butcher shop. It’s fantastic. People come from 10 miles to get their meat there. I thought, ‘I’ve got to say g’day.’” They’d worked together for former John Cain and Joan Kirner government minister, Barry Pullen. He knew her determination. “I think in Anne’s genes is a desire to change the world and, whatever she does, she is there to try and make things
better. There are plenty of people who speak highly of Anne and there are some people who can't stand her. But that's what someone like Anne generates because she can get up people's noses. She can be a pain in the arse... but for the right reason.”

A former newspaper and radio journalist, who had worked in public relations and as media advisor for State Labor in the Cain and Kirner governments and in opposition, he’d started his own media business after a stint with the Melbourne Institute of Textiles (now RMIT), gone back to government as advisor to then Attorney General Rob Hulls, started up on his own again and, when we met at the plush RACV City Club in Bourke Street in early 2010, was “back into government”.

Horrigan-Dixon saw the chance to enlist his support when they met unexpectedly.

“G’day Anne,” he said.

She walked with him as he went to buy vegetables.

“Can you do us a favour?”

“That's always been Anne's great strength. She will get people to work for her. And that's what she did. I helped her write a press release and then I was involved. Anne's strength was her ability to touch people with what she wanted to achieve and you couldn't say no.”

Now she was on the phone from a party at the network offices, Julian Burnside at her side, asking for his help with a trip to Canberra – and he would not say no.

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The Fitzroy Learning Network-based campaigners hoped to succeed, for one thing, where the earlier protest fell short – in securing a meeting with a newly-appointed Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone, not just advisors. Mark Madden had his thoughts on a protest at which the theatre production of story and song “added to the reason for being there and in a sense gave us cover”. They’d be able to lobby more successfully than they might have had they not come to perform a play. He was thinking of other ways to persuade politicians and others to listen.

The strategy was to bring the play to Canberra under the banner of Refugees Say Thank You Australia. Those who were either neutral or opposed to refugees would wonder why they
were being thanked, given their harsh treatment. “Hopefully that could start a conversation that would focus on them as real people, as depicted in the play, their particular situation, their courage, their desire to make a contribution,” explained Madden, who impressed some involved with his calm influence at a time of anger, desperation and despair over government policy. “People were angry and burnt out,” one involved recalled. “Mark had this ability to just pull different ideas together and reach a consensus.”

The media strategist knew the challenge was formidable. “Advocacy wasn’t getting very far for a number of reasons. The Howard Government’s strategy was quite brilliant from a nasty point of view, in the sense that they dehumanised these people. So you rarely got any coverage of these people… and TPVs were fearful that any publicity would actually set their cause backwards. The government sent a very clear message that they would be tough on all these things. You stuff with us and we'll go you. That was very much the atmosphere at the times…”

Madden knew the value of the Kan Yama Kan players’ stories. “The best advocates were these people themselves. They left their families in very dangerous circumstances and took huge risks to get to a place that they believed represented a new life, a new opportunity and some of the values that they believed in and we take for granted. You have to humanise them not only through the media but also get them in front of the decision-makers. That was the genesis of it.” The ex-journalist who did a cadetship at The Sun News Pictorial and worked at ABC Radio, Madden was disappointed with coverage on asylum seekers. “I came out of journalism with a very strong belief the Fourth Estate had a vital role to play in a democracy. It was about keeping governments honest and all that sort of stuff.”

Viewed from the “dark side” – as journalists traditionally regard ex-colleagues who have gone over to work in public relations – the Canberra press gallery seemed too dependent on government as a source of information, too distant from people they were reporting about. The reportage rarely provided an international context and often resorted to the language of the government, wrongly describing asylum seekers, for instance, as “illegal”.

“What was missing,” Madden told me, “was decent journalism.”

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It was a trying time in Australia’s Iraqi community. Many of nearly 25,000 at the time - more than 6000 in Victoria - had relatives and friends in Iraq. For asylum seekers there was the added fear of being sent back. “Every morning I wake and ask myself – will we be here tomorrow?” Aoham spoke from behind an ornate screen. “I watch my children go to school carrying their big bags, wearing their uniform, hope and happiness rising in their eyes and I ask myself what kind of future is waiting for them? Now I don’t know what to think or to cry for: me and my family, who may still be forced to leave Australia... or for my people who continue to struggle from nightmare to nightmare.”

The invasion of Iraq began on March 20. By April 9, American forces had taken Baghdad. By July 22, US officials confirmed that Saddam son’s had died in a gun battle in the northern city of Mosul. The Kan Yama Kan players would reach Canberra in the last days of November - weeks before Saddam’s capture was announced on December 14.

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One month to curtain-up. Fifteen people met at the Napier Street building on consecutive Tuesdays that October to plan the Canberra trip. Horrigan-Dixon remembered: “We pulled a group of people together and we raised nearly $20,000 to take them to Canberra and we employed an advertising agency. We paid them nearly $4000, and they had come up with some ideas.”

It was not enough to appeal to those who already shared their views. “There are the converted; there are those you will never convert and there are those in between,” Madden told me. “And for the movement to succeed, it had to get those in between. And the best way to do that is to turn something on its head.”

Support for asylum seekers cut across political boundaries and challenged perceptions. Some might assume regional Australians would be the most conservative and biggest supporters of the Howard government’s policies on refugees. But Rural Australians for Refugees drew its support from across the spectrum.

Madden thought of something social researcher Hugh Mackay had written – the third of his Ten Laws of Human Communication: “When people’s attitudes are attacked head-on, they are likely to defend those attitudes and, in the process, to reinforce them.” They would do the unexpected – a “soft sell” approach and make it known that this time the TPVs were
going to the capital to express their gratitude. “The reason we came up with the Refugees Say Thank You Australia tour is that most people didn't expect refugees to say thank you because they had been treated so badly,” Madden explained.

There was much to do. They must talk to local government officers about the use of a bus, organise billeting in Canberra, liaise with asylum seeker groups and others in New South Wales and South Australia, arrange a soccer match with the press gallery and barbecue. “We are doing this because refugees want to say thanks for the support of ordinary Australians without whose help they would not have been able to survive,” they wrote.

“They want to highlight the generosity of Australians. They want to open a direct dialogue with ordinary Australians about what it is like to be a refugee and why they had no choice but to flee their own country. They want to show that they understand every Australian’s need for security and protection and they simply ask that we understand their need for security and protection.”

Parliament House, they wrote, was “the people’s house”. “It is NOT the politician’s house. We are using the people’s house to thank the people NOT the politicians. Although there are some we would like to thank, the aim is not to be party-political.”

Madden was determined to maintain a low profile. In Canberra, he’d stay away from meetings with politicians. “I knew a lot of people on the Labor side of politics and people on the other side of politics might know my name. I didn’t want to jeopardise the meetings on the basis of my involvement.” Another volunteer, back in Melbourne after a stint in New York, would coordinate the approach to politicians, each of whom would receive a letter with follow-up telephone calls.

As Usama Aboujundi, Michael was one of three co-conveners who signed a letter sent to announce they would be in Canberra on Sunday, November 23 and Monday 24 to “give all members of parliament and their staff the opportunity to appreciate the issues faced by the holders of temporary protection visas”. They would perform Kan Yama Kan that Sunday at C Block Theatre, Gorman House Arts Centre in Batman Street, Braddon and on the Monday in the Parliament House Theatrette. The delegation would present “Thank you certificates” to MPs, with the request that they in turn present them to the groups in their electorates who had supported refugees. “We extend an invitation to you and your staff to attend these
events,” they wrote. “We would appreciate the opportunity for members of the delegation to meet with you directly.”

Beneath the three signatures was a note that said in bold: “We understand your need for security and protection and we ask that you understand ours.”

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*Kan Yama Kan* was the focus of a loose coalition of activists and asylum seekers headed for Canberra by bus, car and plane. “We thought this couldn't just be a Fitzroy Learning Network thing,” Mark Madden, then also on a bus to Canberra, would explain. “...Anne (Horrigan-Dixon) was crucial to getting all those people involved...We invited everyone to be there and play a role.”

They came from as far afield as Albany Shire Council in Western Australia and Brisbane’s Romero Centre for asylum seekers. A contingent of Hazara men came from Sydney. Among those headed for the national capital that weekend, Ian Skiller, a farmer from a New South Wales Riverina town called Tooleybuc and a young Afghan a medical graduate from Kabul University who worked on his property. Ian Skiller remembered the afternoon two years earlier on which Abdul Nasiri and five other men arrived at his farm by car “in traditional Afghan dress”. “…I was a bit shocked and taken aback, I’d never seen anything like this,” he said in *The Road to Tooleybuc*, an award-winning 2004 documentary on ABC TV's *Australian Story*. “They’d come to see me about accommodation, and we organised that, and then they were also looking for work, so I ended up employing them as well.

“Abdul was the only one that spoke English when they arrived on the farm. And then, after a while, I found he had a sense of humour similar to mine and we just seemed to click after that. We spoke a lot about his culture and our culture. Yeah, we just get along so well. I find it a bit unbelievable that I’ve ended up with an Afghan friend like Abdul. Yeah, we’re just really close, we do everything together and try and sort things out for the rest of the boys and we work very well together.”

Ian Skiller was a former Melbourne Gas and Fuel Corporation worker who switched to farming 15 years earlier. “Before Abdul and the boys, the other refugees, had come to Tooleybuc, I was a little bit worried about Dad,” his daughter, Bianka, told the filmmakers. “Things were pretty tough on the farm ... But now he just seems brighter. He’s got a real
purpose.” His parents built a house on the property. His father had since died. The Afghan men were close to his mother. “Ian was having difficulty finding workers, and the Afghan boys arrived,” Shirley Skiller said. “And they’re very good workers, and they work for 10 hours a day, and they never whinge or that.”

Ian Skiller added: “When the boys arrived, I was only working half of my property due to a labour shortage. I now work the full size of my property. I’ve heard people say the Afghans are cheap labour, but I can tell you that they’re very good bargainers and they really do get a good price for their labour.” The farmer introduced them to locals who were showing them how to play cricket. They’d cook at picnics. Religion was “non-existent” for Skiller. But he respected their commitment to pray five times a day. “I’d trust the boys with me life,” he said. He engaged a retired teacher to give them English lessons twice a week. He was increasingly involved with Rural Australians for Refugees. He took on work cleaning at the local school to supplement his income after he found the activism “started to tax my resources a little bit”.

He heard the government wanted to bring in doctors from overseas to take positions in the bush. Why then, could Abdul Nasiry not settle with his family and practice medicine in Tooleybuc? “The problem with the temporary protection visa is the boys’ lives are uncertain,” Skiller told the filmmakers. “I find it a little bit cruel that we can’t speed the process up.”

Also due in Canberra, John Walker, then Mayor of Young, in south western NSW, who reportedly claimed up to 90 Afghan TPV holders working at the local meat processing plant and elsewhere had contributed more than $2million in a year to the shire. Melbourne-based Sister Brigid Arthur, of the Brigidine Asylum Seekers Project, was in the news around the time of Kan Yama Kan’s opening night after accompanying Woomera escapee brothers Mantazir and Alamdar Baktiyari from hiding to the British High Commission in Melbourne. She’d received a call from an anonymous person to come to a spot near the top of Little Collins Street, where she met the boys.

The Baktiyari family saga had been “cleverly manipulated” by the government and media to discredit refugees, she said, when I visited her at the Brigidine offices in Albert Park months later, and news coverage often failed to recognise the extent to which some people identified more closely with tribal groups than national borders. I’d approached her for an
interview days after attending a rally she addressed at the State Library. On a sweltering Saturday outside the library, she stood amid placards that said “Burn Baxter Burn”, “Close the Camps” and “Lock Up Ruddock Free the Refugees”. Sister Brigid read letters from detainees. A 34-year-old Afghan former teacher in Baxter wrote that the view of the surrounds was blocked and all she could see was the sky.

“The mental health of these people just deteriorates, from my observation, in an extraordinary way. Sometimes their physical health, too. It seems to me about as bad as we could go (without) torturing people,” Sister Brigid said.

Spectacles dangling on a shirt with an Aboriginal design when we met at her offices, she reminisced about a travelling salesman in a turban, riding a covered wagon from farm to farm when she was a girl. He might have been from Afghanistan. They called him “Rhubarb”. Farming families around Kaniva near the South Australian border bought his drapery and welcomed his visits. “Mum would offer him what we had,” she said. “Dad would give him a place to put his horse and camp for the night and we'd go down and talk to him.” Sister Brigid was then in her late 60s. She summoned a time when she was Marie, eldest of eight in a churchgoing family on a wheat and sheep farm. She recalled attitudes towards a man they called Rhubarb that would seem to reflect something of the way Australians respond to outsiders. “We quite looked forward to his coming. Nobody said then, 'He's strange,' or 'Maybe you can't trust him.' He was just somebody they knew.”

Her mother, then in her early 90s, had vivid memories of Rhubarb, and another hawker, probably Indian, who set aside money in his will to buy lollies for all the children in the area. “If you'd asked my father, should we be bringing all these people into the country, he would have said no. But is Rhubarb OK? Yeah. Because we know him. It's the same now when people talk about the Muslims as though they're this other race of people. But once we sit down and talk with them, we've much more in common than the differences.”

Her mainly Scottish forebears settled on an original selection in the state's west in the 1880s. After boarding school in Horsham, she'd spent a year back on the farm, tempted to apply for a teaching scholarship. Instead she opted for the order named after Irish abbess St Brigid. “I thought, I'll have a go and get it out of my system.” She professed in 1956, taking vows a year at a time to give herself a chance to change her mind. “And here I am.”

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Sister Brigid was a member of a Brigidine justice group that tried unsuccessfully in the early 1980s to persuade authorities to allow them to teach English to Cambodian refugees. She was a frequent visitor to Melbourne’s Maribyrnong detention centre. There she met a young Pakistani man with extreme depression over his captivity. The Brigidines raised a $3000 bond to the Immigration Department to enable him to obtain a bridging visa. By the time we met, he was one of five asylum seekers housed near the order's Albert Park centre. “Jesus said, when it comes to the final crunch, what I’m going to ask you is, did you visit me when I was in prison? Did you give me some food when I was hungry? Did you shelter me when I was homeless? Did you look after me? Whether Jesus actually said those words or not is not important.”

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Anne Horrigan-Dixon went to Canberra in her silver-grey station wagon. She stopped off to pick up a young woman then living in Bendigo. Lara McKinley, the photographer engaged to handle media, valued Horrigan-Dixon’s direct approach. “There were a lot of reservations from within the rest of the community about that approach because everyone else was so protective and so guarded and really not happy about talking to the media...because of some past experiences.” The activists’ publicist remembered: “I’d been hired basically to get positive stories about refugees in the press and I’d managed to get Channel Nine news to come to do an interview with some of the Tampa people who had just arrived in Melbourne. Anne was totally supportive because Fitzroy Learning Network was working with them. I was driving down to Melbourne and the phone kept going off with everyone else freaking out completely about this potential news story. The phones kept going off. They were just panicking.”

Seymour. Euroa. Benalla. Wangaratta. Anne Horrigan-Dixon steered her station wagon up the Hume Highway, across the Murray River, stopping in Albury for a meal before heading on more than 360 km north east to Canberra.

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Crossing the land now in a royal blue sedan, Arif and Michael Aboujundi had been on the road before. “I was very active with Usama,” Arif told me. “We spoke in schools. We spoke at universities. We spoke about the situation - what was going on and who we are and how we came to be here, all of these things, because people didn't have any knowledge and they...
just said that they are just boat people and they are bad…” They were featured together in reports in *The Ballarat Courier* and *The Hepburn Shire Advocate* days before a Kan Yama Kan performance at Daylesford Town Hall in early September – weeks before the Canberra trip. Arif was confident throughout in his ability to make his way. Arnold Zable tells of a conversation. “I remember we were trying to find our way around Canberra and it was very difficult. I kept getting lost …but Arif, if you got into his car, would take you straight to where you had to go. So I said, ‘Arif, how come you know where to go?’ He said, listen Arnold, if I can find my way from Afghanistan to Australia by boat, going through Canberra is easy.”

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On a Canberra-bound bus, a visiting American Fulbright student was sitting alongside Aoham’s six year-old nephew, Mohammed, his knees folded up, the garment a makeshift shelf on which to rest a handheld gaming system. “It’s a long bus ride,” she’d detail her observations in a neatly-typed 21 pages. “He’s antsy.” The boy’s older sister, Nourahn, was busy with a colouring book. He took the American by the hand to meet their mother, Aoham’s sister, Wiam, nose to the window, watching the land roll by. “She told me she was raising the kids on her own. Her husband was killed in prison in Iraq. She was studying to get her real estate licence and working at a dry cleaner. She had been in Australia for over two years. The kids were both in school and doing very well. Her parents were here. Her life was here. And their visas were up in two months…”

Their visit would coincide with a key debate in Parliament. In a red-carpeted chamber days later, 76 senators empowered to seek changes to legislation by the House of Representatives would vote down a Federal Government decision to exclude thousands of islands from Australia’s northern migration zone after a small fishing vessel brought 14 fugitive Turkish Kurds across the Timor Sea to tropical Melville Island, north of Darwin. Holbrook. Gundagai. Yass. Majid Shokor remembered the mood on the bus. “We had a very good time together. There was a high expectation from the refugee community that maybe something would change when they performed inside Parliament house; maybe not so much high expectation as hope. There was a lot of hope.”
But that was not all. As the bus neared the capital, he could sense the anxiety among those awaiting an imminent decision on their asylum applications. The temporary protection would soon be over.

“According to ancient Chinese lore,” Dutch historian and essayist Johan Huizinga wrote in his classic late 1930s book, *Homo Ludens*, “the purpose of music and the dance is to keep the world in its right course and to force Nature into benevolence towards man ...”

The players were hoping for more than this, feared less.

It could be make or break. And they knew it.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

Thirty six hours to curtain-up. Kan Yama Kan came to Canberra towards the end of a year in which it was seared by bushfires that reached into the suburbs, killing four people, injuring nearly 500 and destroying hundreds of homes. It was a year of change and some controversy in which a Democrats leader stepped aside after an altercation with a Liberal senator, a Labor leader was replaced and the Greens leader suspended from Parliament after interjecting during a speech by George W Bush. The men, women and children in the Say Thank You delegation came to the capital at a time when a new Immigration Minister who might decide their fate had held the portfolio for just a few weeks.

Majid has that scar on his left arm to remind him of trouble in Najaf. He knew what it meant to have to flee your country, to be forcibly separated from your kin and live in exile. He saw the “deep sadness” in players’ expressions. They’d play two shows in town that Sunday. The next day they’d be onstage in Federal Parliament. They’d plead their case in meetings with politicians. This would be the last chance to get their stories across, the end of the line. Then what? “There was a desperate situation,” the actor said.

So much depended upon these few days they’d spend at the political heart of the country. Much care was taken to ensure distressed and vulnerable players were not unnecessarily traumatised. Someone spoke for a distressed man so altered after jail and torture his mother didn’t recognise him when he returned to his village before fleeing Afghanistan. Others were told they need not perform. They’d come this far. Just two more shows in the town and then on to Parliament House. They were this close.

And then it all began to unravel. “People were so emotionally distressed,” Anne Horrigan-Dixon recalled the first of two performances in a Canberra theatre. “They came to me and said, ‘we can’t put it on’. And I said, ‘Look, we have got people who have bought tickets. You’re just going to have to pull yourself together’.”

The players kept their composure for most of the Sunday afternoon performance. Then one after the other broke down and wept.

Lisa Maza played several roles, including the Woomera nurse and TV interviewer. She had drawn on her own background in lines in which she compared the experience of indigenous Australians with the predicament in which asylum seekers found themselves. “The attitudes
that led to the persecution, the slaughter and the incarceration of indigenous people of Australia, that took our land from us, stole our children and made us non-citizens in our own country for almost 200 years are the same attitudes that exist today,” she’d tell audiences, “that keep these people and their children imprisoned behind razor wire and deny them a safe place to live in peace with their family.”

Then Kan Yama Kan director Robin Laurie suggested something different. In Canberra, Laurie suggested she reflect on her personal experience. So Maza spoke new lines she’d written. “When I was born in 1967 I was considered a nobody, an alien in my own country - born months before the 1967 referendum which finally led to the inclusion of Aborigines in the reckoning of Australia’s population.”

And, speaking these words in the small theatre that day, Lisa Maza wept.

“She delivered her lines beautifully,” Majid Shokor later spoke of her grief and the impact on others. “Then she started crying. And then Hassan started crying and all the actors on stage, everyone, was crying, including myself.”

Arnold Zable remembered: “As she was doing a monologue, she began to cry and it was electrifying. Everyone began to cry. I was crying. We were all crying...It didn’t seem at that stage as though they were going to get permanent residence in a hurry, if ever...It took a lot of courage for those guys to get up there and tell their stories.”

And Michael Aboujundi: “It was a heartbreaking thing for every single one - the audience, us, musicians; everyone was in tears...”

Lisa Maza reflected on her distress when I called on her at her flat years later. “I wasn’t even a citizen of this country until I was four months old. I think there were possibly a couple of reasons why my monologue, especially the first line, affected me so much when I delivered it that time in Canberra. The play had been written for people who were fleeing their lands and came here wanting to make a life for themselves and their families. I was employed as an actor but was obviously very affected by their stories. Baghdad was about to be bombed in a major way and there were very real concerns for those whose relatives were living there. There was this kind of urgency, more of the public had voiced their concerns about refugees. We were in Canberra and were going to meet politicians up at Parliament House.
and hopes were high. We certainly hoped something might change for these guys and their temporary protection visas and the awful predicament they were in.

“Bringing my own personal story into the play brought with it the history of Australia and the horrific way we have been treated and continue to be treated here in our own country. It’s a history that every blackfella in Australia understands all too well because we live it every day. We are not running away from persecution and even if we wanted to, we have nowhere to run to. We are here where we have always been. We are the oldest continuous living culture on earth and we belong to this land.

“When Robin invited me to open the show and share some of my story I was very happy to do so because I saw it as an opportunity to voice my opinion, to educate people in general and to share in the telling of personal stories that many of the actors in the play had already done with me. The reality though of having to talk about the absolute injustice of not being considered a human being when I was born proved much more difficult than I had imagined. Often the truth of the story would overwhelm the telling of it and that would make it harder to get through.”

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Robin Laurie later blamed herself for Lisa Maza’s distress. “That was my fault because I encouraged her to change (her lines)...I asked her to make it a more personal piece.” She’d been cautious with the players from the outset, determined to prevent unnecessary trauma.

“Whenever I rehearsed I would say, ‘you don’t have to do this’, ‘you don’t have to say anything you don’t want to say’. I constantly stressed that. You have to be really vigilant that you are not re-traumatising people.”

That afternoon, she saw the distress as Iraqi pigeon fancier Hassan spoke his lines.

The grief took him as he spoke about the pigeons he’d kept. He was, he said, “still flying in circles looking for somewhere safe to be my home…”

“I said to Hassan that he didn’t have to say that anymore and he didn’t have to do the next performance if he didn’t want to do it,” Laurie said. “He said he was okay. He wanted to continue. There was a wonderful scene between the shows of the children sitting with
Hassan comforting him. And then I had to think really carefully about how to bring everyone back together to start the next show.”

It was enough that several players were required to revisit every “gruesome” detail of their experiences as they sought to convince officials at Refugee Review Tribunal hearings. She structured the production with this in mind. “That’s why it was important at the end of this to have something strong and positive.” She ended the shows with a song inspired by an account of the welcome by the people of the island of Zakynthos to strangers on the Turkish-flagged Brenier.

First there would be a playful exchange between two youngsters – the girl who once played in snow with her father in the mountains near Sanandaj, and Majid Shokor’s daughter, Touka.

“If you could be anyone in the world, who would you be?”

“The Immigration Minister”.

“And what would you do?”

“Give all refugees a permanent visa…”

Then the cast would laugh and clap to the strains of *All God’s Beggars* and *700 Rolls (Anytime the Wind Can Change)*.

“Seven hundred rolls did the baker bake today

Seven hundred guests did the town receive today…”

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Anne Heintz is a graduate of the University of Arizona. She has an honours degree in English and theatre, a diploma in theatre directing from the Victorian College of the Arts and a doctorate from Michigan State University. She once did a presentation on the Refugees Say Thank You trip at a teaching event in Louisville, Kentucky. She was homesick for Tucson when she first saw Kan Yama Kan in Melbourne the previous year. “Interspersed with this basic journey tale were songs, satirical skits and poetry,” she wrote. “My heart and mind reached out towards the warmth onstage and I sobbed and sobbed. The stories were funny and awful and true ... The actors were joyful and alive, sorrowful and warm. It was some of the best theatre I had ever seen, and it was because I, as an audience member, was
welcomed into an experience by the very people who needed to be welcomed themselves. Here were people with nothing, providing me with stories, food, music, dancing and humour, in the hope that I could come to understand them. At the time I saw the show I never imagined I would meet them. I left, grateful for reaching out to me in my loneliness and silently wishing them well.”

She volunteered to help and, a year on, she took to the road with a busload of players and supporters. Heintz saw the start of the first Sunday show. “The audience started to trickle in, half-collapsed umbrellas poking into the foyer. ‘Is this where we find the refugees?’ ‘Yes, come in. Welcome’. The young girls circulated the room with silver trays, offering the audience tea, apricots and dates to enjoy before the show.”

Majid Shokor’s younger daughter, Touka, “played chief hostess”. She’d told Heintz on the bus to Canberra she wanted to be an FBI agent when she grew up, “to go on missions, solve mysteries and stuff like that”. “Touka circulated with a huge smile among the patrons, happy when they were happy that they were getting free food. The audience placed their small, gold-rimmed tea glasses back on the girls’ silver trays and moved in to take their seats.”

Majid Shokor told the young American the play had evolved from an ancient Arab style of storytelling called Hakwati. “The word ‘haku’ means to tell a story and ‘wati’ implies a sort of street-cred, an expertise in working the people. There is no stage per se, no curtain, no props. The hakwati, like other forms of storytelling throughout the world, is dying out…Kan Yama Kan preserved elements of this traditional theatre, while simultaneously saluting pop culture… The play’s arching narrative was based upon a journey’s tale, like those of the Arabian Nights. Tossed in for flavour was a little Saturday Night Live-style sketch, and voilà: a show that was as honestly varied as the lives of the people starring.”

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C Block Theatre was near capacity. The audience was seated. The musicians were playing. The show was about to start when a six year-old “pitched a fit…” Heintz volunteered to mind young Mohammed and his sister, Nourahn. Soon she was off with the two in borrowed sandals to the National Museum. By the time they returned to the theatre, the show was over. The American was unprepared for the grief among players and others.
“Everywhere people were crying. I asked Anne Horrigan-Dixon what had happened. She said the actors could barely get through the play. They were breaking down as never before.”
Lisa Maza approached. “It’s just too hard,” Heintz remembers her saying. “Why do we do this to ourselves? Why do we tell the stories over and over? It’s just too hard’.”

Maza was born on January 26 when much of Australia celebrates European settlement and others the endurance despite it. “It was always a big deal because it’s Survival Day.” In the play, she compared attitudes to asylum seekers to those that had made her people “non-citizens” in their own country for almost 200 years. I asked about likely empathy for refugees. “I’m not sure that indigenous people can feel it any more than anyone. Surely anyone could relate to that. I think if you’ve had a good life you don’t want to even go near it.”

*Kan Yama Kan* players were traumatised, she recalled, by news of the war in Iraq. “I suppose the bombing of Baghdad was happening. We heard it on the news every day. So I think at that point it was a feeling of real sadness. People were nervous that their families were going to die. Normally when people act they keep it together and put on a brave face most of the time. But at that time Baghdad was being bombed and everyone was upset. So there was this real feeling of coming together.”

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Until now the challenge was to get up onstage. Now there was more to do. Earlier that Sunday, before the first of the two shows, the players and supporters attended a workshop to prepare for a series of meetings scheduled with 19 Federal politicians - 10 from the ALP, seven Liberals and one each from the National and Democrats. “The strategy was that we could not advocate for them (the asylum seekers),” Mark Madden explained. While others would attend the meetings with politicians, the TPVs would do most of the talking. “They were their own best advocates.”

Eight of the politicians were from Victoria, five from NSW, two from each of Queensland and Tasmania, one from each of Western Australia and South Australia, among the latter, the recently-appointed Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone, an appointment with whom Madden regarded as “a major breakthrough in itself”.

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They’d arranged to meet Liberals Fran Bailey, Sussan Ley, Sharman Stone and Tseben Tchen. Then there were others including Bruce Baird and Petro Georgiou, among the few in the Coalition opposed to mandatory detention and partly credited with a decision announced by Howard in June 2005 to allow families with children to live in the community and regular reviews of asylum claims. Georgiou crossed the floor the following August with fellow Liberals Russell Broadbent and Judi Moylan to vote against a bill forcing asylum seekers to be processed offshore. “I think that it’s going to be a very difficult period to look back on without a sense of regret and sorrow,” Georgiou said years later when I called at his office in east suburban Kew. “The argument about queue jumping is one thing. We’d all like to have orderly processes. But where that argument got us as a nation was that we punished people ourselves...It’s like somebody comes to your door and says can I have a handout? And you say, no, and I’m going to lock you in my shed. If somebody comes to the door and says can I have some bread and you say, well there 40,000 homeless people in Melbourne who should have been in the queue and now I’m going to lock you up. It’s a funny response.”

The Say Thank You delegates arranged to meet a Nationals’ MP Lara McKinley had seen in Kerang. “The whip of the federal Nationals, John Forrest, is campaigning to get the Government to take a more sympathetic attitude to refugees who want to stay permanently in Australia,” journalist Michelle Grattan wrote in The Sunday Age weeks before the delegation arrived.

They had arranged to see Labor’s Nicole Roxon, Laurie Ferguson, Jennie George, Duncan Kerr, Jann McFarlane, Kerry O’Brien and Brendan O’Connor. Gavan O’Connor, member for Corio south west of Melbourne, put out a press release the day after he met them. “This week in Parliament politicians listened to the positive messages of the delegation, Refugees say Thank you to Australia as they expressed their gratitude to the many people in the community who have helped and supported them,” the statement said.

O’Connor said the plight of TPV holders was of great concern to him. “These people have been classed as refugees because they had no choice but to flee their countries, yet this government prefers to leave them in limbo rather than grant them permanent residency. They have had every imaginable obstacle put in their way and are suffering enormous psychological strain. I will call upon the government to show compassion to these most
marginalised people and to make changes to its TPV policy so that these refugees can have greater certainty and security, for themselves and most particularly for their children.”

The organisers arranged to meet Tanya Plibersek, Bernie Ripoll and Melbourne MP Lindsay Tanner. They requested meetings with Simon Crean, who days later resigned as Opposition Leader to be replaced by Mark Latham after he narrowly defeated Kim Beazley.

“Unfortunately we did not get the opportunity to speak with you at that time,” Michael (as Usama), Mohammed Arif and one other (Hamed Saberi) signed a letter dated December 17 congratulating Latham on his appointment as Federal Labor leader. “We would like to invite you to meet with a delegation of TPV holders either on a formal or informal basis to hear of their experiences, the contributions they are making in communities throughout Australia and the impact the uncertainty of TPV status is having on them and their family. Given the importance of the issue and the busy nature of this time of the year we are prepared to travel to wherever is most convenient for you to meet...”

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**Twenty four hours to curtain-up.** The Sunday *Kan Yama Kan* played in downtown Canberra, some of the players and others involved appeared in a program about asylum seekers on TV. Some of the people in the show were featured in the program. Brown mentioned the program hosted by long-time presenter Geraldine Doogue in the Senate. He regretted that Vanstone did not hear “the asylum seeker story” presented to parliamentarians that day. “By the way, I think it was conveyed quite strongly on Compass, the ABC TV program, last night,” the Greens leader said.

Doogue told an increasing number of people believed that the way we treated asylum seekers was a litmus test for rating a civil society. “So tonight we meet a diverse range of people who’ve opted to walk with asylum seekers,” she said. “They’re going against the tide of government policy and popular opinion to extend warmth and welcome to refugees and to help raise awareness in the wider community.”

The program featured activists and others around the country. In a community forum on a cold winter night in the Dandenong Ranges outside Melbourne, Michael Aboujundi revealed something he didn’t onstage in the play - authorities in his country killed his father in 1997.
He and his cousin were arrested and assaulted. He fled after his cousin was re-arrested. He came to Australia, one of 75 to brave the ocean on a leaky fishing boat. “It took me seven days. During that terrible week I didn’t know I am alive or dead.” Aoham Al Dujayli told the forum of her confusion in Port Hedland. “I was shocked because I’m not a criminal....” Julian Burnside asked what had become of a country that locked the innocent “behind a 9,000 volt electric fence”. Arnold Zable noted there was “no such thing as a queue when it’s time to run you run”.

Alice Garner was filmed elsewhere, at a high school near Maribyrnong detention centre. She was there with Actors for Refugees which, she said, aimed to use performance skills, “to humanise the issue and to bring some human faces and voices to these stories, and to tell stories for people who were not in a position to tell them themselves”. “I think when there is a moment of connection, when they think oh but that person is a bit like me, or I’ve felt like that before,” she explained on TV. “Suddenly they imagine what it might be like to be in that position, that’s the point when people will pick it up and go with it and do something themselves.”

Maribyrnong Secondary College’s principal was “embarrassed that we are so close ... to the detention centre and that we have not been working with particularly the young people in that centre”. “You hear about it on the news and you’re told about it but you don’t get the full story,” a student said. “And you also hear other sides like, well, maybe they shouldn’t be here, and a lot of prejudiced sort of comments but things like this help make us aware.”
CHAPTER TWELVE

Twelve hours to curtain-up. The late great Jimmie Rodgers once sang about “peach pickin’ time in Georgia/ apple pickin’ time in Tennessee...” It’d soon be stone fruit picking time in Tooleybuc with workers coming in to pick and pack in tubs, buckets, bags and trays from the early hours.

“Clothing should be hard wearing and give maximum protection from all weather, particularly the sun,” the National Harvest Labour Information Service cautioned. Ian Skiller settled in the township between Swan Hill and Balranald in the late 1980s. He grew grapes and apricots for dried fruit and vegetables on his 20.3 hectares. So what was he doing in flimsy Western shirt and jeans outside a woolshed 660 or more kilometres from home on a chill morning? He drove to Canberra to be part of the Refugees Say Thank You delegation with Abdul Nasiri, the Afghan doctor among several TPV holders from that country who worked on his land. On a day on which the Senate would vote on a Federal Government proposal to excise 4000 islands from Australia’s migration zone, he was about tell a TV crew why refugees should be welcomed here.

The farmer from Tooleybuc would have had no problem being up and about in the early hours that Monday morning. But Skiller seemed to have some misgivings at the choice of location about 5 km south west of the capital used to shear sheep and prepare wool for market. At least that was the way Anne Heintz saw it. “He was very nervous about appearing on national television in front of a wool shed,” she recalled. “He was in fruit, not sheep.”

Still here he was outside a structure made of a patchwork of rusted, corrugated sheets on sturdy wooden stumps, surrounded by tall pines and with signs on a nearby fence cautioning inexperienced riders at an “equestrian park” or “horse activity centre”. A rider appeared at a distance. Not a sheep in sight anywhere near the woolshed.

Twenty eight men, women and children waited nearby for a prompt from the TV crew to remove coats and jumpers to reveal the message on their orange t-shirts. They stamped their feet, sang and massaged shoulders to keep warm.

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The *Today Show* had arranged to interview the farmer and cut to a shot of the refugees. When would they be on TV? When the prompt finally came, the 28 straightened up, smiled and waved. Each held high a letter, together spelling out the thank you message. The filming done, the delegates were back on the 12- and 20-seater buses on which they’d come from Melbourne, heading towards a building above which towered an 81-metre flagpole above a building designed to resemble two boomerangs. The 4700-room “new” Parliament House opened by the Queen on Capital Hill in May 1988 is said to attract more than a million visitors a year. “We had some time before our scheduled press conference so we stopped to play on the beautiful public lawns in front of Parliament House,” Anne Heintz recalled. “We stood next to Nigerian activists lined up and shouting from megaphones. The refugees held up REFUGEES SAY THANK YOU AUSTRALIA signs and we took pictures. We did somersaults, tumbling on the soft green grass...There was a joviality that comes from being warm, being fed, silliness the outdoors allows…”

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**Six hours to curtain-up.** It’s almost noon. Democrats leader Andrew Bartlett had arranged for the use of a Senate committee room for a media conference. “He was very important in enabling us to get this thing happening,” Mark Madden said of Bartlett, who would step aside within weeks after an altercation with a Liberal Senator. “He and his chief of staff facilitated us getting into Parliament House. They invited us and got us passes and got us into areas that we otherwise wouldn’t have. The only way we could get those facilities was if it was a press conference by Andrew. He was open to this issue of not wanting it to the party political. That was a dilemma for us. He was a Democrats senator. He was very gracious. He said enough at the start to say that this is my press conference but this is what it’s all about....”

Lara McKinley recalled some initial concern over missing equipment for recording the media conference. “We screwed up ... The news crews were really pissed off because they had to have their mikes all over the table.”

McKinley went on to work for Oxfam. For now, her job was to promote “good news stories” about refugees and asylum seekers. She was to work with local and metropolitan media, to “build relationships and encourage strategic follow-up”. She made contacts with journalists
at newspapers, radio and TV around the country and put out a media release during the Say Thank You visit quoting Mohammed Arif ("Temporary protection visa holders understand Australia’s need for security and protection and we are asking Australians to understand that we also need security and protection and want to continue to contribute to the Australian community") and Tooleybuc farmer Ian Skiller who said: “I’ve had up to 14 Afghans working on my farm for the past three years. They are great workers and have become good mates. We’ll have enormous trouble replacing them if they are sent back to Afghanistan.”

She had prepared a note on media “opps”:

“WHO: Refugees on TPVs, including women and children, metropolitan and rural employers, community leaders, including Mayors.

WHAT:


Press Conference: 12.00pm: Committee Room 1S4: Presentation of certificates to Mps to thank refugee groups in their electorate, 2 minute excerpts of play, Kan Yama Kan.

Interview opportunities with members of delegation.

Play: 6.30pm: Excerpts from the play Kan Yama Kan for MPs and members of press gallery.”

Mohammed Arif spoke at the media conference. John Walker, mayor of Young, outlined the benefits to a rural community of the 90 TPVs working at the local abattoir. Walker was in the news a year or so earlier condemning hate mail on car windscreens and in letterboxes, warning a decision to employ the Afghans would lead to gang rapes, shootings, murders and unemployment. The mayor said at the time the leaflets came from an extremist group in Sydney. He said locals had welcomed the Afghans, who were there under a work placement program. The abattoir had been unable to get workers and an employment agency “sourced them out of the detention centres”.

“He was great because he was talking about the economic study that they did in Young that showed that the refugees were contributing $2.5 million dollars to the local economy,” Lara
McKinley said. “That study really reinforced the economic message that we were putting out into the general public.”

Soon it was time to hear from a young widow from Iraq. “Far from the frazzled mother, nervous for the unknown, Wiamb had rallied and she was calm and collected,” Heintz wrote. “She spoke of the boat trip, the flight from her country, the decision to put her children’s lives in danger.” She stepped onto the overcrowded boat with one of Mohammed’s hands tied to a wrist and clenching his sister’s tightly. What would their father think of this? Was she doing the right thing, risking their lives? As she spoke, the two children now sat quietly in her lap – “subdued and on very, very good behaviour.”

Now a youngster she’d met on the bus from Melbourne had the microphone. Sarah Noori was in the news that week. She was one of two “teenage Afghan refugees ... (who) want to say thank you for their new life,” The Herald-Sun’s Michelle Pountney wrote days before the delegation’s departure. Though the past three years had been the best of their lives, they now feared for their future. The Canberra Times reported that Sarah and her mother were told that they must return to Afghanistan. “Sarah, who lives in Melbourne and dreams of being a doctor or lawyer, is now fighting to stay in Australia where she says freedom and the opportunity to go to school are her greatest joys,” an unnamed reporter wrote.

“The Noori family’s temporary protection visa has run out and the Immigration Department has told them it is safe to go home,” Age journalist David Wroe reported. He wrote that they were among about 50 TPV holders in Canberra to lobby the government, some of whom would meet Amanda Vanstone. “I was at school and when I came home there was this letter saying you’ve been rejected, you are no longer refugees and you have to return to your country,” Sarah Noori told the reporter. “My heart just dropped.”

Before they fled Afghanistan in 2000, the Taliban arrested Sarah’s father. He escaped and the family made it to Australia via Indonesia. “They would have killed my dad and there is no life without the man in Afghanistan . . . you can’t do anything if you are a girl.” Wroe quoted a United Nations spokeswoman in Afghanistan who said that Kabul was “relatively safe”, but faced serious problems with basic utilities such as electricity, while education and medical services were also in considerable disarray. The spokeswoman said there were still security problems in the south of the country. Militants murdered a young UN aid worker in Ghazni a
week earlier.

Sarah Noori impressed Mark Madden as “wise beyond her years”. “She was tough. She was smart.”

Anne Heintz described the scene. “In her orange shirt, she sat down in front of the microphone and spoke of her gratitude to the Australian people and to John Howard for allowing her the happiest years of her life. She wept with fear at being sent back to a country where she would have no future and her presence would be perilous. She thanked her mother and heads turned towards the silent, veiled woman crying, motionless in the corner of the room…”

Retired teacher Heather Stock was there. “… There was an Afghan man from South Australia who was very earnest and rather boring and went on rather a long time. I’m sure it was very important to him but I remember other people saying ‘oh dear, this is a bit difficult’… And then Sarah was going to say a word or two at the end and she just said basically, ‘look if I am sent back to Afghanistan I’ll have to get married. I won’t be allowed to go to school.’ Of course at this stage the 28-day notice (the time allowed before departure under the bridging visa issued after the expiry of the TPV) was hanging over her and her parents. And she just put her head down on the table and she burst into tears. As you can tell, I still find that quite hard to tell without a lump in my throat…”

Lara McKinley took photographs during the trip. “I guess I can block out emotions if I have a camera in front of me. But I do remember I was crying when I was taking photos when that young Afghan girl said, please don’t send me back. Every time she said that, she just burst into tears. It was incredibly emotional.”

Majid Shokor was struck by the silence in the crowd. “I think for the first time, some of the Australian politicians and media people came face-to-face with real refugees. They could feel the pain of these people.” They were moved that “this innocent, beautiful girl” was about to be sent back. “There was some kind of heavy feeling of guilt about that.”

Among the few politicians and staffers in the small crowd, Greens leader Bob Brown and Greens Senator Kerry Nettle were suspended from Parliament for 24 hours weeks earlier
after interjecting during an address by the US president to a joint sitting of the two Houses of Parliament. Brown was impressed with the courage of the asylum seekers that day. “It takes guts because Parliament is such a towering place for the average citizen let alone someone who has been through all that travail to get to this country,” he told me years later. “The ultimate indignity of it all is that by-and-large such delegations are ignored and that includes by the media. They are just part of the side show of the big issue of the day which is whether some VIP’s pension is up or down or some parliamentarian has created an infraction or whatever the news is that day.”

On this particular day, MPs had their minds on health issues. Then Health Minister Tony Abbott had introduced a package boosting the government’s Medicare budget by $2.4 billion over four years with money spent on increasing doctors’ fees by $5 for bulk billing concession cardholders and children under 16.

After each had spoken, Kavisha Mazella plucked and strummed her guitar and sang:

“The island folk know with one shift in the wind/
Those secure today will be cast adrift/
They are not afraid to welcome the stranger…”

To Anne Heintz it seemed that anyone in that cosy room must surely be wondering what it might be like if some wind came along and changed everything.

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Twenty six minutes to curtain-up. Light entered the red-carpeted Senate Chamber through the oval prism of a skylight that would later emit a red glow in the dark night. Bob Brown rose from among three-tiered jarrah seats to condemn a Federal Government decision to exclude thousands of islands from Australia’s northern migration zone after the fishing vessel brought the 14 Turkish Kurds across the Timor Sea to tropical Melville Island. His party could not, he said, accept the government’s “move to set up two countries in terms of the law”.

The red from the monitor above the domed roof told people the senators were debating into a night. They’d wake to news that Labor, the Democrats, the Greens and two
Independents had voted to overturn government regulations and restore the islands to the migration zone.

The Greens leader mentioned the screening the previous night of an ABC TV program coincidentally featuring some of the players and their supporters who came to Canberra to take part in a theatrical production in Federal Parliament that day.

He said thousands who came to Australia by boat in recent years were “unbelievably humiliated, mistreated and put behind razor wire”. “I never thought I would see innocent human beings being treated in this fashion in this country,” he said. “... Today the minister was strong on saying clearly that there is something villainous about people coming to Australia despite the desperation that puts them onto boats,” Brown directed his comment to the recently appointed Immigration Minister. “It is a great pity that she did not hear the asylum seeker story that was presented to parliament at lunchtime, and will be further presented later today...”

Bob Brown spoke for almost 10 minutes. He didn’t say what it was he saw in the Senate committee room earlier that day. But he made it clear that had the Immigration Minister been in the audience she might have better understood those who had endured “enormous stress and difficulty with heart-rending stories to tell”. The government’s action on asylum seekers, he said, “tears at the fabric of this country’s perception of itself as a humane, caring, neighbourly country which does not cross to the other side of the road when it sees somebody in trouble”. Brown resigned as Greens leader in April 2012 and from the Senate that June. “Presentations in Parliament do badly,” he told me. “Very few parliamentarians ever turn up and they are usually distracted by whatever is going on in Parliament that day.”

He remembered his frustration with media coverage of the children overboard affair. “I ranted and railed about that at press conference after press conference and at public meetings during the election campaign and, by and large, it was totally ignored.... I just think that there is a certain herd mentality about it all and it is very influenced by Murdoch media. It is very, very hard to break into it. I know as a parliamentarian, I gave many a very impassioned speech on what we should be doing for the environment and nearly 100 per cent was ignored because it wasn’t on the agenda of the day.”
Brown reminded Vanstone years later of the harsh treatment of asylum seekers. “I brought this issue up at a conference in Sydney – the razor wire lock-ups in the Australian desert – and she denied there and then on the stage that she had done anything but try to get rid of it, stop it. We had a debate about whether Australia was becoming a hardhearted country which had lost the idea of a fair go and I took Amanda up on the fact that she was minister for immigration in that harsh period. Afterwards in the debate period effectively denied that she had done anything but try to stop it.”

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Seventeen minutes to curtain-up. Amanda Vanstone spoke at 5.43pm. She told senators of a meeting earlier that day with members of a council representing Tiwi Islanders (from Melville and Bathurst Islanders) who gave her a carved boat with people in it “as a reminder that (they) are very much in support of these regulations”. She received the carving from a man named Gibson Farmer, “the local islander who was on the beach and told these people to get back in the boat and shove off”.

The minister was adamant. She told the Senate Australia had lived up to its responsibilities to people seeking asylum. “Let us not have any suggestion that we have some policy that is cruel and harsh – that does not allow for people who want to make a claim to make it and that does not somehow provide for protection for people who need it.”

She gave no hint, if she knew it, that she was due to meet some of the players in Kan Yama Kan the next day.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Curtain-up. They’d played venues in city, suburbia and country towns in 17 months since opening night. Some had dropped out but most had come to Canberra to put their case onstage in Parliament House. Then one by one wept in performance at a local venue. Some wondered if they could go on. Still, here they were. “As-salam alaykum. Welcome.” Once again it was time to tell tales. They were performing for themselves and others even if they did not know, as they stepped onstage, that nearly 9000 still had temporary protection visas. Hundreds had already expired. Others would soon. As the political staffers and others took their seats in the Parliament House theatrette, Anne Horrigan-Dixon looked about her. Apart from a few political staffers, there was just one familiar face of a politician. “There was hardly anybody there. It was very disappointing.”

Carmen Lawrence took a seat near the back of the theatrette. Later, the former Western Australian Premier and Federal Minister would speculate on who might have been in the small crowd. Labor’s Maria Vamvakinou? Liberal Judi Moylan? She wondered if she was not conflating several occasions after so many years, just guessing at some who might, or might not, have been in the audience.

"Time is running out," Alice Garner spoke. "Over the next year thousands of people recognised as refugees will have their Temporary Protection Visas reviewed. The process has already begun. Those whose visas are now expired all receiving the so-called Open or XC Visa. This means they live under the same conditions of the temporary Visa, no family reunion, no leaving Australia to visit family. The open Visa could go on like this for use or be revoked tomorrow. So they still cannot settle, insecurity magnifies and they could be sent back at any minute. Back to what? The devastation of Afghanistan? The deadly chaos of Iraq? The political turmoil of Iran? Or perhaps even death?"

“My name is Farmaz . I come from Sananadaj,“
“My name is Hassan. I come from Bagdad.”
“My name is Massoud.... My city is in Khozistan; this means sugar state.”
From behind the screen, Aoham al Dujali spoke quietly: "I never imagined that Australia be the safe part of my life, it was just too far. But we crossed the sea, ignored all the risks, our eyes focused on one thing, warm safe green land. And in the first moment I put my feet on this land I felt like I was a new baby and this is my birth, even though my body was full of the scars of pain and sadness, but I thought this blessed land will heal my wounds. But my wounds are not yet healed, as we have been cursed and tortured for the past three years by this temporary Visa. Every morning I wake and ask myself – we be here tomorrow? I watch my children go to school caring their big bags, wearing the uniform, hope and happiness rising in their eyes and I asked myself what kind of future is waiting for them? No I don’t know what to think to cry. For me and my family, may still be forced to leave Australia after November this year or for my people who continue to struggle from nightmare to nightmare."

*Kan Yama Kan* came to Canberra almost a year after Carmen Lawrence quit the Shadow Cabinet over Labor policies on asylum and immigration that she said were “brutal and inhumane”. The show came to town soon after she was elected national president, an office she would hold from the start of the following year until the former Science Minister Barry Jones took over in January 2005. Unlike many in Parliament, she’d encountered asylum seekers and seen how they were detained or held in uncertainty on temporary visas. “By that time I had visited quite a few of the detention centres including Baxter and Port Hedland and I had met with many of their representatives. I had met with a great many people who were on temporary visas at one time or another. So it was a regular thing. Maybe one of the reasons that I stood for presidency of the Labor Party was to demonstrate that the members of the party felt like I did.”

Clinging to a notion of an inclusive Australia, I’d naively associated the horror of those times with a particular government, a particular Prime Minister and Immigration Ministers, a particular time. I knew that a Labor government had introduced the Migration Amendment Act in 1992, months after it opened Port Hedland detention centre for Indo-Chinese asylum seekers. But after the Rudd government was elected in late 2007 and went on to scrap the Pacific Solution and abolish temporary protection visas the following year, I foolishly assumed that what I had reported on was an aberration – a glitch - and we had moved on.
Lawrence, of course, had no such illusions. “I knew a Labor Party was capable of just as much bastardry as the Liberals,” she said. “That was one of the reasons that I tried to draw attention to the fact that the membership didn’t share the views with the parliamentary group. Not all of the Parliamentary group it has to be said. But Julia Gillard, in particular, I thought was unreconstructed on this question. One of the reasons I never supported her particularly strongly was I just knew her attitudes on this were pretty populist. Whatever it took to shut people up, I think, was the way she looked at it. And it was a bit hard to find any principled position. But she wasn’t alone in that. “…The Labor Party started to really fall apart on this question well before Howard and Tampa. They had already made so many concessions.”

Lawrence recalled an encounter at her electoral office. “One of the experiences that was most powerful for me was a young man we had helped to get out of detention by making representations about his case. He came to thank me personally. He was an Iranian Hazara, very nervous. This was some time later. It wasn’t as if he just stepped out of the place. And in an uncharacteristic way, really, given the cultural expectations, he reached out and gave me a hug and I reciprocated and could feel the ribs. He was so thin. You could feel his ribs. And just in the process of discussing what had happened to him, he had a panic attack and we had to virtually revive him…

“Port Hedland was horrible. You can’t imagine how awful those places are; just the psychological temperature and tenor of those places. So I guess the representation of those experiences in a work of art congeals, if you like, a whole lot of different experiences.” How valuable might Kan Yama Kan have been to people who, unlike her, had not otherwise had direct contact with asylum seekers? “Oh very, I think. It’s the reason that governments try to prevent people getting to know potential asylum seekers’ personal life experiences. The Tampa was very clearly that strategy. The more you understand the lives and circumstances of these people, of course, the more sympathetic you will be. So the government didn’t want any of that.”

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Brazilian Augusto Boal, who inspired Carmel Davies in her work on projects including *Kan Yama Kan*, once wrote that theatre could be “a weapon for liberation”. The show was among more than 30 separate productions dealing with the plight of asylum seekers staged in Australia in a three-year period to 2005. It wasn’t the biggest, the brightest or necessarily the best. Alice Garner tells of another group which went to the capital to tell stories about asylum seekers. “Actors for Refugees also did a Canberra trip. It might have been six months later. I didn’t go. But they had some high profile actors and they got a lot more politicians in there because they were actors … and yet I don’t know how much impact that had.” It might not have had the stars – professionals Majid Shokor, Alice Garner and Lisa Maza notwithstanding. Yet *Kan Yama Kan* alone succeeded in enabling asylum seekers to tell their own stories in Parliament House in performance, media conference and meetings with politicians.

“Like all good stories, when it ends, perhaps we should go away just a little bit wiser,” Garner told the audience.

Majid Shokor: “Maybe a little bit kinder.”

If you were to judge the impact of *Kan Yama Kan* by the attendance in the small theatrette alone that Monday evening you might reckon the bold ambition to use music and storytelling to change attitudes and policy had misfired. But for some involved attendance at the Federal Parliamentary theatrette that Monday night in November was beside the point. Mark Madden, for one, regarded the production primarily as a “cover” to help facilitate access to Parliament House and bring the people with the stories to politicians and media. “I flew out knowing we had achieved what we wanted to achieve,” said the strategist, enlisted months earlier by the irrepressible Horrigan-Dixon while out shopping for groceries. Anne Horrigan-Dixon was buoyed too. “We had a huge sense of things turning around.”

Though few turned up to hear the “tales of kindnesses and cruelties” at the Parliament House show that Monday evening, it was the Trojan horse, the wooden construct that carry the desperate players and their stories where they might otherwise not have gone. Some politicians who met with the *Kan Yama Kan* players and others were encountering temporary protection visa holders for the first time. “They’d never heard their stories,”
Horrigan-Dixon said. “Nobody knew what the situation was. And people’s attitudes changed.”

Arnold Zable recalled: “For many of them (the politicians), it was the first time that they were confronted face-to-face by an asylum seeker. And it was very hard for them to look away. They couldn't look away. They were staring in the face of the reality of it.”

Zable was in a group with the Mayor of Young, John Walker, among others. They had an appointment with the ALP’s Laurie Ferguson, who was appointed Shadow Immigration Minister the following year. “He was strange. In the beginning he was raving. He got very confused about the issue. He was raving about his electorate, (saying) there are people that cheat; this that and the other. But there was an interesting trajectory to the conversation because by the end he was talking very differently. He saw who we were and what we were trying to do. If I had to sum up, it was an action where we pulled the rug from under the feet of those politicians.”

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I was raised at a time and in a place where performance was a perceived threat to an official policy of segregation. I grew up at a time when authorities allowed “blacks” in my hometown, Cape Town, to see the pantomime, Cinderella, with a “white” cast but refused a similar permit for Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. The apartheid government refused to allow a Spanish dancer to perform for “coloured” audiences because his entry permit stipulated that he play to “whites” only. “Blacks” were not allowed to attend performances by the celebrated ballerina, Dame Margot Fonteyn, at the city’s main opera house, the Nico Malan. The American entertainer, Eartha Kitt, could perform for segregated white, Indian and coloured audiences but not “Africans”. Apartheid-era South Africa was “the kind of country H.G. Wells might have invented with people occupying the same space but living in different time frames,” South African journalist and author Allister Sparks told me when I interviewed him in a Sydney hotel room in my mid-twenties. Few white South Africans would have witnessed the rioting in black areas which caused the death of 2,500 people and seen the detention without trial of 20,000 in just a few months. “Whites just don't see blacks.”
Weeks before I left Cape Town to settle in Australia in the early 1980s, I went along to see a play called Woza Albert! (Rise up Albert!) in which two players enacted the response of various characters to news that Christ has arrived in South Africa. A few years later, I interviewed the actors Mbogeni Ngema and Percy Mtwa, with director Barney Simon in a Sydney hotel room. Woza Albert! was by then a sell-out success in London and New York. Ngema and Mtwa conceived it in 1980 while touring in the South African townships with a production called Mama and the Load, by the so-called “father of township drama”, Gibson Kente, who died in late 2004, about 18 months after he announced that he was HIV positive.

I’d seen Kente’s productions while I was a student at the University of Cape Town. Kente’s players sought to vividly portray aspects of township life far removed from the experience of the audience. I was reminded of the few productions of his I saw while watching Kan Yama Kan.

More than 20 years before his death, Ngema and Mtwa were in a busload of actors turned back from the black homeland town of Rustenburg because they had no permits to enter. Talk turned to the existence of God. “Everybody was angry, disgruntled,” Mtwa explained. “We hadn’t been paid for four or five weeks. On our way back this topic began... About God – whether he exists, whether he is watching over all that is happening. Finally, we came to the idea of Jesus Christ coming to South Africa.”

After the troupe disbanded, Mtwa and Ngema approached the influential co-founder of Johannesburg’s Market Theatre, Barney Simon, who was known for his collaborative approach with actors and musicians. “It’s a simple story about two days in jail,” Simon told me. “After they have been released they begin to argue on a train about religion; one is very religious, the other isn’t. They argue about what would happen to Jesus if he came to South Africa. The whole play is a fantasy on what would happen if he did.”

At one point, Jesus is imprisoned for political activities. Later he is urged to resurrect the spirit of heroes in the struggle against apartheid. The word “Woza” in the title means “arise” in Sotho and Albert refers to Nobel Peace Prize-winner and former President of the African National Congress, Albert Luthuli.

Mtwa said: “What we are actually saying, particularly to the people of South Africa, is ‘let the spirit of those people rise up’.”
With Kan Yama Kan, as with Woza Albert, people marginalised by authorities could tell their stories onstage. We can only guess at the impact.

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“And the story never ends,” Alice Garner said as the show came to a close. “Only the choice remains the same. We must listen to the story before we condemn. We must look our story tellers in the eye. And then we discover that their eyes are reflected in ours.” The story resumed in parliamentary offices the following morning. Anne Horrigan-Dixon coordinated meetings from the cafeteria. It was from there that. She was aided there by Tanaya Roy, a law student and network worker who had travelled to Canberra with Heather Stock. Asylum seekers, employers, activists and others were carefully chosen. Horrigan-Dixon regretted later that Sister Brigid Arthur was not in one of the groups. Others had to be resisted. “All these carloads of Hazara men came down from Sydney. Hazara men rule the roost. They all came and said, we want to see Amanda Vanstone, and I said, no. We put so much effort into being strategic about who would go in.”

The plan was to allow asylum seekers to articulate their own concerns. Among those selected, Wiam, who came to Canberra with two young children whose father was killed in Iraq; her sister, Aoham, confined behind a screen onstage but now able to speak openly; Michael Aboujundi told me much later he hoped to take the show on to Sydney Opera House; Mohammed Arif, the only Kan Yama Kan player to have performed in the earlier show, Mother’s Hand; and Sarah Noori who, having moved others to tears at the press conference, joined the players onstage, thanking “the Australian people and John Howard for the three happiest years of my life”. “Even if I get sent back to Afghanistan in the next month at least I will know what happiness is,” she said.

Were the asylum seekers coached? “We briefed them about the purpose of the meetings and some of the best ways to tell their stories,” Mark Madden said. “But they had to tell the story. In fact, the people who went in with them had very clear instructions that their role was simply to help run the meetings, not to advocate on behalf of the TPVs. They were to run the meetings but make sure that these people got their story told.”
Anne Heintz arranged a separate meeting in the cafeteria to introduce refugees and activists to officials from the US State Department. “Their final comments to me were, ‘thanks for giving us a good excuse to get out of the office’. At the time, I was crushed...”

Aoham remembered a Nationals MP’s demeanour. “He was very arrogant. I remember the way he was sitting on his chair and moving his body. He didn't face me. I was here (she gestured to her left) but when he looked at me, he turned his chair a bit and looked at me that way (she gave a side-long look). I felt he was saying, ‘You are worthless. You are nothing.’ He said the government was sending a strong message to people smugglers. I just interrupted him straight away and I said, ‘That is exactly what Saddam did in 1983 when he killed all the Al Dujayli men to send a strong message to other clans not to oppose him. So you are doing something that Saddam did. You’re following the same policy.”

Michael Aboujundi told of a confrontation with a Liberal MP. “We were about 11 of us there in her office. One of the Afghan girls was telling her story. She burst into tears, this little girl. And this politician was a heartless lady. She said, you guys came through the window. I started questioning her. And I said, if the gunmen walked into the office right now, what would we do? Would we say, please wait gunmen we’re going to write a letter to the Australian embassy in my country, which doesn’t exist...I said, look, this is what I’d do. I’d come through a window. Her response was, ‘Okay, next!’”

Mohammed Arif was outraged with a Liberal MP. “I nearly got into a fight with her. I was really upset. She said there a lot of refugees in Pakistan, Syria and Egypt. She said we are not responsible for all the miserable people in the world. She said why did you jump the queue?” Someone in the group had responded that if you have a hungry lion behind you, there is no choice but to try to escape. “When it was my turn I said, ‘in Afghanistan Hazara people have been persecuted. We are working very hard to pay tax. We’re working on farms’. Ian Skiller was there. I said, ask him how hard we work. She said, ah, you are stealing the work from indigenous people.”

So upset was Arif, he was led from her office. “I couldn’t stop crying.”

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They crowded into the Immigration Minister’s office. A staffer went to fetch extra chairs.
“Amanda Vanstone: pragmatic or compassionate?” said the headline to a report in The Age a year after she replaced Ruddock. “When Vanstone took over, 1114 men, women and children were in detention,” journalist Russell Skelton, who went to a village in the central Afghan province of Uruzgan in 2003 to investigate Ali Baktiyari’s background after claims the refugee had fraudulently obtained a temporary protection visa, wrote in the broadsheet on October 10, 2004. “Today there are about 900, including 139 women and about 60 children. A year ago there were 131 Iranians in detention, today fewer than 90. Rejected Afghans have had their applications for asylum reassessed and many, including some initially accused of being Pakistani, have been released.

“It has been a remarkable 12 months, with 417 visa applications being dispensed from the minister’s office. But does all this make Amanda Vanstone a more compassionate, a more reasonable person than Philip Ruddock, indeed a subverter of the Howard hardline on refugees?

“The short answer is no. Nothing in what she has done subverts the policy, or even significantly changes it. She has simply adjusted its implementation to match the changing political environment.”

Skelton argued that Vanstone was given the immigration portfolio after pressure on the Howard Government for a less rigid approach. A group of Liberal backbenchers had threatened to cross the floor over amendments to the Immigration Act if steps were not taken to remove women and children from mainland detention centres. National Party MPs, including then Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson were urging moderation and flexibility.

“With boats no longer arriving and a tight election looming,” Skelton wrote, “John Howard took the opportunity to remove a powerful negative from the public debate. And that is precisely what Vanstone has done, without in any way compromising the fundamental tenet of the policy: mandatory indefinite detention for failed asylum seekers who arrive by sea without identification papers.”

Arif recalled the encounter in Vanstone’s office. “I was sitting here; Usama was sitting there and Aoham was there....”

Each member of the group introduced themselves. Arif spoke of the situation in Afghanistan, someone else of Iran. How had the Minister responded? “Really respectfully,”
recalled publicist Lara McKinley, who sat directly opposite her. “She was receptive. She was nodding as people told their stories. She was leaning forward.”

Did they get through to the newly-appointed minister? Six months later, Lara McKinley would receive a message from one of the organisers on her wedding day in a small Catholic Church near the central Victoria town of Newstead. “Mark Madden texted me on the day we got married,” she said. Her groom, Mike, proudly shared the news with guests. “He actually stood up and said, ‘we’ve just got this news’. It was on the front page of The Age. ‘Look at what Lara's been involved in’.”

The headline to the story that appeared on May 22, 2004 said: “Visa holders to get second chance.” “Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone is believed to have instructed her department to prepare legislation allowing holders of controversial temporary protection visas to apply for permanent residency,” Russell Skelton wrote. “The move signals a shift in the Howard Government’s rigid requirements for an estimated 9000 asylum seekers granted TPVs after arriving by boat without identification papers.”

A spokesman for Vanstone had declined to comment on the proposed change. But Skelton wrote that the minister was believed to have briefed her department on the proposed changes that week “and told them to prepare draft legislation as a matter of priority”.

Skelton went on in this report to note that The Age has been told that while the new legislation was directed at an estimated 4200 Iraqi TPV holders who could not be returned because of the deteriorating situation there, Afghan and Iranian TPV holders would also benefit.

“The Federal Government has been under intense pressure from backbench MPs to modify its TPV regime,” he wrote. “The National Party's Kay Hull, who holds the NSW federal seat of Riverina, urged that TPV holders be permitted to remain provided they settle in regional and rural areas and do not have criminal backgrounds. Last month Senator Vanstone announced that she would lift a freeze on processing TPVs for Iraqis following deepening unrest in Iraq. Immigration officials are also struggling to process an estimated 2070 TPVs due for renewal in the next six months...”
In a church near in central Victorian Lara McKinley was taken aback by Skelton’s report. “I just remember thinking I’ve been part of something that actually shifted a policy that we thought was impossible to shift....I nearly fell off my chair.”

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Michael Aboujundi recalled: “I was sitting right next to Amanda Vanstone, on her right-hand side. She didn’t know much about these stories. Probably she had a general idea. But she had probably never met a refugee in her life...We only had half an hour with her. Then she had to leave. She had parliamentary duties. But we spoke to her advisers for another hour or so.”

What happened in that half hour with Vanstone has been variously interpreted. Arif was buoyed by the encounter. “She said I’ve only been in this position a few months and if people who are working hard in this country are found to be a refugee, we are not going to send them back. But we are not giving everybody a visa. We will process your cases one-by-one and I promise you that no one is going to force you to leave the country. We were very happy. I understood what she was saying. I don't remember exactly. But I was very happy because I had been rejected. The way she said it, I took it as a policy change…”

But though others including Michael Aboujundi were ready to contrast the minister favourably with her predecessor Philip Ruddock and word quickly spread of the meeting with the Minister, there was an understandable caution among those preparing to leave. To Majid Shokor, the mood on the bus to Melbourne was “very, very heavy”. “Heavier than the bus itself,” the actor said. “People went to Canberra with a bit of hope they may be able to change the opinion and maybe get a direct answer. But they came back with almost nothing. So that was it. It was a long journey back.”

They were quiet and withdrawn. “I remember that when we left Canberra in the morning it was a very chilly, very cold. We met at one of the lakes maybe to have a close look at the ducks. They just wanted to sit on the bus and go to Melbourne.”
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Curtain call. They came with salad, fruit, lasagne, desserts, bread, humus and other dips and dishes. Some brought bottles of wine and beer; some, assuming they could not – this being a Muslim household – regretted they had not. An engineer from the inner city had recently returned from the host’s troubled homeland and wore a brown t-shirt that said, Hard Rock Cafe Kandahar. A man from Tehran had spent four and-a-half years in Australian detention centres. Another man I met there taught at a tiny school in country Victoria. The guests stood or sat in a large circle in the spacious lounge room built by Arif, who arrived by boat on January 26 2000, the day on which Australians marked another year since the arrival of the first Fleet.

It had been hot much of the day but was so chilly by late evening you shivered in short sleeves. “Mohammed Arif is so keen for you to join him to meet his family and catch up after such a long time,” the emailed invitation said. The address we were given missed a digit. One car after another stopped off at a vacant lot between two massive dwellings on the sharp incline before ringing to be directed on uphill to blue balloons in the front yard.

“There were a lot of people milling around number seven,” said Julian Burnside who arrived late with Kate Durham.

Arif had worked hard to create this big house looking out over outer suburbia for his wife Zahra, their Afghan-born son, Navid, and Australian-born toddler, Nima. Navid was just a few years old when his twin sister and another, a teenager, died after Arif left them to seek refuge for his family. The house was a work in progress. When we entered through a garage up a steep driveway to the left of the dwelling, young men were barbecuing lamb kebabs in a backyard where a gaping clay hole awaited the swimming pool that would surely come.

November 2010. The Australia’s High Court had days earlier unanimously ruled in favour of two Sri Lankan asylum seekers refused permission to ask for a protection visa after reaching Christmas Island because it had been excised from the migration zone under the Pacific Solution legislation in 2001. “It will change the way it works legally,” Burnside told Arif’s guests. “All we have to change is the attitude of the public so that the politicians get the idea.”

“That’s right,” said a woman nearby, “exactly.”
This journalist heard the barrister say: “The sobering fact is that there was about two years when the attitude of the press and the public was favourable to boat people but that was when boat people weren’t coming. We were generous as long as they didn't come.”

There was, he said, “still a bit of attitude shifting to be done”.

Kate Durham remembered the “terrible” times of activism. “I don’t even want to remind myself. I have actually blocked it out. I don’t like revisiting it.”

Arif hadn’t seen old friends in a while. Some had decided to tell stories so that Zahra might learn something of her husband’s first years here. “Let’s continue,” said a wiry man with angular face and jagged head of greyng hair. “We have got the circle,” Arnold Zable added. “We can't stop until we have gone around the circle.”

Our host that spring evening, spoke finally when others in the circle had had their say.

“Listen, is it Arif’s turn to speak?” someone asked at the belated house-warming party on the outer edge of an outer south eastern suburb. Arif was about to speak when the man alongside me made a quiet request. “Can you make it short?” Michael Aboujundi called out from the back of the small crowd and to my right. There was some laughter at this.

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Seven years had passed since Kan Yama Kan players and others headed homeward after taking their show, at this man’s suggestion, to Parliament House in Canberra. As others travelled by bus and car mostly back to Melbourne, Michael boarded a flight in Canberra before crossing more than 3700 km to Western Australia to appear in Perth District Court at a trial for a man who allegedly organised the transport of 1700 people on 13 boats to Australia in just over two years to September 2001.

“I had been called to go as a witness because he was a person who I met before coming to Australia,” Michael said of Keis Abdul Al Rahim Asfoor, who was found guilty in December 2003 of 12 charges under section 232A of the Migration Act 1958 and pleaded guilty to one count of possessing a false passport. “I was in one of the boats that was organised by that guy. I met him there a few times. I met him in Bali and I met him in a town called Lombok Raya just before we went onto the boat.”

Michael went to Canberra with Arif. He came to Perth alone. “One of the Federal Police officers was at the airport waiting for me. Once I got off at the airport he goes, ‘Oh, you
must be Michael’. He shook hands with me. I asked him whether he had my photograph and he said, ‘No, as a matter of fact I saw you on TV.”

I asked him if lawyers had questioned his ability to identify Asfoor despite his limited vision. “I made it very clear to the court, to everyone, I was not able to tell you what he looked like. I couldn’t tell you his height, weight or whatever, the colour of his eyes. I simply could not do it. But I think they were more interested in who I spoke to. What that person’s name was who introduced himself to me in Bali and Lombok and how much money he took.”

Michael estimated he had paid Asfoor about $US2000. “He introduced himself as Keis Asfoor when we met him at one of the hotels.” I wondered if Michael felt that he was exploited by Asfoor. “The Australian Government will take all steps possible to ensure the criminals behind the abhorrent practice of people-smuggling will be brought to justice, wherever they are in the world,” Amanda Vanstone said after the guilty verdict. Was he angry? “No I don’t think I was angry at him at all. I wasn’t, to be quite honest. Because he made it very clear to everyone. He said, ‘Do you want to have a photograph with me?’ ‘Whatever they ask you, just tell them the truth.’ So obviously he was very confident. He knew exactly what he was doing…”

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Anne Horrigan-Dixon had helped organise this reunion. “It’s a very special anniversary,” she said. “It’s 10 years since Arnold met Mohammed. For many of us, it is exactly seven years this weekend since we went to Canberra to appeal to the politicians to change their attitude on temporary protection.”

Someone dropped a dish. Horrigan-Dixon continued: “So many people had letters saying that they had to return to their country of origin and they had six months to put in an application to change that. And at that stage everything was locked down and everybody had to go back. It was really terrible.”

It was an anniversary too of the day Arif’s friend Ali Sarwari went to New Zealand to be reunited with his wife and daughter. “So this is a very special day for us for a whole lot of reasons. But I think now we say that it is a very special day because it will be the day we all came to Mohammed’s beautiful new home and met his lovely wife Zahra and two beautiful children Navid and Nima and we reconnected again after so long.”
Horrigan-Dixon turned to Arif’s wife. “It was such a hard, hard, hard time Zahra. Our hearts absolutely bled for what Mohammed went through. We tried to do everything. We kept saying, things will eventually turn around.”

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Learning Network co-worker Tanaya Roy at her side, Anne Horrigan-Dixon had steered her silver-grey station wagon out of Canberra on a sunny morning in November 2003. “I said to her, you take the map and tell us where to go. We came to a fork in the road. She said, I think we need to go to Goulburn. I drove to Goulburn, which added an extra two hours to the trip. She thought of the Goulburn River near Eildon. So we went for an hour to the north and then we had to come back. “The whole time I was driving,” Horrigan-Dixon recalled, “I was being rung on the mobile phone by people either from the press gallery or politicians. Nigel Scullion, a senator from the Northern Territory, had been a fisherman with a big boat out of Darwin. He had picked up a boat load of people. And he met one of the men he had rescued in Canberra. So it was all very, very emotional.”

Almost two years on, in August 2005, Horrigan-Dixon reflected in an account she wrote for a community newsletter on the changes since Jafar Yawar’s knock at the door of the Napier Street centre where “our sign simply said ‘Free English Classes’ and that brought us into a whole new world”.

“...On Sunday morning I was asked to speak at two Uniting Church services as their congregation is organising a fundraising concert for us next week. As I was driving to Beaumaris in the sunshine I was thinking how well I was and how I was getting over the tragedy and trauma of working so closely with our TPVs over the last five years.

“I sat in the church with these lovely people and they sang … ‘I was there when you needed me, a friend to listen to me, someone to heal me…. no matter what the color of my skin, my name or my creed’. I thought how true this has been of our experience at Fitzroy Learning Network ...So many fantastic people bringing in bedding, lilos and mattresses. This grew into a statewide support for the temporary protection visa holders, people in detention and asylum seekers.”

She wrote of the response of staff, volunteers and the network committee to the chaos after the first arrivals at the centre, ready advice from State MP Richard Wynne and local
agencies including North Yarra Community Health in attending to the sick. There was support from regional Victorian communities, Rural Australians for Refugees, churches, schoolchildren, someone met in a butcher shop who’d helped organise a national delegation to Canberra, “ordinary Australians who want to stand up and be counted”.

“Last week when the last children were removed from detention was a day to celebrate the power of people and our democracy,” the network coordinator wrote. “Mohammad Al Janabi came to see me yesterday, the biggest smile I have even seen as he will see his mother and family this weekend after about 14 years……happiness radiated from him. He was brave enough in the very early days to tell his story and it has eventually paid off. Today another Iraqi man came in with a Permanent Protection visa so after six years he can see his wife and eight children and they can be reunited in Australia. So we have lots of work to do welcoming the families of our TPVs.”

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The telephone rang.

“Mohammed Arif is not here,” Horrigan-Dixon called out.

When Arif spoke finally, it was to express gratitude to several there that evening. Fitzroy Learning Network had been a family to him then and Horrigan-Dixon, “the person who made a difference not just for me but all those refugees who came through that door. They’ll settle down and do a lot of good things in this community because they met with the right person.”

Carmel Davies, who had initiated the theatre action at the heart of this book, would not make it to Canberra with Kan Yama Kan. “My father was dying,” she’d explain. “My family relationship intervened.” Nor was she among those gathered at a housewarming and reunion on the edge of suburbia for Mohammed Arif. “Once people are on their feet and the crisis is over and the visas came, I withdrew.” But she was not forgotten that night. “Especially I acknowledge Carmel,” Arif told his guests. “Whenever I needed something she was there. She was a wonderful woman and I really respect her. I wish she was here tonight.”

The language teacher did not lose her commitment to using the stage to tell stories that might otherwise be untold. When I went back to see her in June 2014 about a new play
featuring refugees from countries including Sri Lanka, Tibet, Sudan, Eritrea and Afghanistan, she spoke of a need to “keep telling people this is what is happening so people don’t turn their backs and forget”.

Among the players a 28 year-old Tamil man on a bridging visa twice fled Sri Lanka, where his father and brother were killed by authorities. He was forcibly returned to Sri Lanka from Singapore the first time he fled. He spent 18 months in a detention centre established in 2010 at Sherger RAAF base, east of Weipa, Queensland, after reaching Christmas Island by boat. We met in a week in which community distress was highlighted by news that a Tamil man on a bridging visa died after dowsing himself in petrol and setting himself on fire in Geelong, following a similar incident in Sydney months earlier.

“I came here by boat and I suffered a lot in detention and live a hard life.”

Targeted by authorities who suspected him of involvement with the Tamil Tigers, he spoke of his concern for 200-300 Tamils and other refugees he knew who “don’t have anything”.

A 22 year-old Tibetan man was imprisoned for nearly a year after taking part in anti-Chinese protests in Llasa. “I have got a precious chance to share my story,” he told me. He’d paid a guide 10,000 Chinese yen to take him with more than 20 others across the Himalayas in mid-winter in late 2010. They walked at night to avoid being shot at by Chinese soldiers until they reached Nepal. He spent more than two years in Dharamsala in India before coming to Australia 14 months earlier. “It was the winter season. It was very cold. It was very high...It is very dangerous because the mountain is frozen. It is like ice. But the guide showed us how to escape. He had experienced how to go. I followed the guide.”

Davies compared the production to Without My Mother’s Hand. “I thought we need to do something like that to get the stories out. People need to hear the stories of refugees to know what is happening and what has happened and they (the refugees) need to tell their stories and be heard and know that people care about what is happening. There are still people suffering in detention and being sent to offshore islands. Things are so difficult for people now so we need to keep telling the stories. Hopefully we can create a little bit more empathy, a little bit more understanding - one step at a time.”

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The night of his party, Arif, recalled the first approach to Fitzroy Learning Network. “Jafar knocked and a beautiful kind lady came and said, ‘Can I help you?’ And Jafar said, ‘Would you teach us English?’ She said, ‘Why not? Come in please.’” There was soft laughter in the room. “We couldn’t believe that. She opened the door. We thought it was just because it was a narrow entry and she just saw three of us.”

He gestured to show how they crowded in soon afterwards. “Seeing all of you here makes me so happy,” Arif said. “It makes me cry but this time from happiness not sadness.” There was mention of a special friend who had travelled with him to country towns and all the way to Canberra to tell their stories to strangers, hoping they would understand.

“Usama,” someone else called out at one point, as though oblivious to the name change years back. “Step up. Step up.”

“Come on Usama,” someone else urged.

Some were clapping.

“I can’t say much more but probably your experience Mohammed was during the day and at night time it was a different story,” Michael deadpanned. Some laughed. “We went to a lot of places – Daylesford, Castlemaine, from one place to another - and I am proud to be a friend.”

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Michael was returning from work by train when a lawyer rang to congratulate him on June 1 2004. Little more than six months after the Canberra trip, he had gained permanent residence. After so many years of uncertainty, he said, “you feel like a real human being.”

Sylvia Hammond celebrated her 91st birthday on a day of stifling heat on December 10 2006 when she accompanied him to the citizenship ceremony at Darebin City Council. “So it was a double occasion, and for her to come and attend to the ceremony was extremely important. It means the true friendship, the true relationship between a grandmother and her grandson, if you like.”

He went back home to Damascus some months later. “I decided in 48 hours that I’m going, no matter what. I rang mum and I said, what are you doing on Sunday? And she said, ‘What are you talking about? Nothing.’ I said, ‘Okay, I will have breakfast with you then.’” I think it
was Thursday or Friday morning. She said, ‘Yeah, yeah, whatever. I’ve heard that before.’ I hung up the phone. I rang a travel agency. I paid with a credit card. I received the ticket by fax. My mother knew I would be there on Sunday at 11 am. She got everyone ready at the airport at 7. It’s not only brothers and sisters. I’ve got a big family - six brothers and four sisters and their wives and husbands and nieces and nephews and friends. There were more than 40 people at the airport. They knew I live in a better country, because I spoke to them about it many times but they hated the experience that I have been through. They hated the fact that I had to go through all of this. They were relieved that I am a free man. I can just fly whenever I want, simply because I’ve got citizenship now.”

August 2012. Anne Horrigan-Dixon emailed an invitation to “a simple gathering” in north suburban Alphington one Sunday. “This week we have watched in sadness wondering how we can support Michael (Usama) in his grief and fear,” it said. “Grief for the tragic loss of his big brother Ismail who was brutally killed by the Syrian security forces last Saturday and fear for his family who are now in terrible danger. As you know, Michael has been a staunch advocate for his adopted Australian community since seeking asylum in 2000. It is unbearable for him not to be able to support his family in Syria during this time of great sorrow and despair. His pain is made so much worse worrying that his mum and family have had to flee from their homes because their lives are at risk.”

Michael’s family was “scattered throughout Syria without the means to support themselves”.

About 60 people crowded into the house. There was a large glass jar in a front room in which guests contributed money to help Michael’s family. Several people encountered in these pages were among those who came together to support Michael in his grief.

Kavisha Mazzella strapped on her steel-string guitar and sang All God’s Beggars, co-written with Arnold Zable for Kan Yama Kan.

“In the dead of the night, there’s A Knock at the Door/
The urgent voice tells you to flee/
You must find a safe place your freedom…”

And we joined in the chorus: “Alleluia! Alleluia!”
In early 2017, Arnold Zable and Anne Horrigan-Dixon helped organise fundraising to bring Michael’s sister, Miriam, her husband and seven children to Australia. The family found a rental house in north suburban Melbourne, the children were soon enrolled at primary and secondary schools. The parents were about to begin English language courses. “You have welcomed a new family into Australia and made them feel valued and supported,” Zable noted in a Facebook update to those whose contributions had helped with airfares and rent.

Mohammed Arif had championed the rights of others who came here seeking refuge. He had done so despite grief and despair. And yet, while others were finally gaining permanent residence, he was among the last of his contemporaries left in uncertainty. This was despite a successful appeal to the Refugee Review Tribunal overturned the Immigration Department decision to reject his application for permanent residence. Had the tribunal upheld the rejection, he would have had 28 days to leave the country. Once approved, the case was sent back to the officer at the department to do the necessary character and police check and issue a visa. “Unfortunately my case came back to the same case officer who rejected me. Every three months I called and her response was, I am the one who rejected you.”

He made several approaches to immigration department officials. “I got very, very frustrated. Whenever I called, they said the security check is not cleared. That was the only answer that they had.”

Finally, he lost patience. “I decided to go to court against Amanda Vanstone.” He was determined even after a barrister warned that if unsuccessful, he could face costs of $15,000. “I said, I have been here for six years without seeing my family. I am in limbo.”

Within days, he and his lawyer had a meeting with an Immigration Department lawyer. “He said what the hell are you doing? You are asking a minister to give you a visa to stay here and you want to take that minister to the court? What are you thinking?”

But Arif was adamant. “This is my decision. I cannot cope with this situation anymore.”

He was on the road to south east suburban Dandenong one Friday and had just passed the MCG about four weeks when his mobile phone rang.

“I stopped the car,” said Arif who was on his way to take part in celebrations for the Eid, a festival that takes its name from an Arabic word meaning "recurrent" and marks the annual
Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca. “Normally my mobile goes automatically to the speaker and I don't have to put the mobile in my hands. But this time somehow I stopped the car.”

He answered the call. It was his barrister.

“Guess what?”

“They rejected me. I lost the case.’”

“You are wrong; the opposite. The Minister is happy to give you your visa if you drop the case.”

“Are you joking?”

“I’m not joking.”

Arif couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He turned switched off his mobile and sank back in his seat in the blue sedan.

His barrister called back.

“Are you okay?”

“No, my heart won’t stop.”

“It was a shock. Finally I would be able to see the remainder of my family. I could decide which way I should go, how I should live ... I was waiting for this news for six years. I just wanted my life back. I was very happy.”

Soon he was with friends, listening to music. “But I didn't tell anybody because I didn't believe it. A friend said, ‘you look happy’. I said, ‘it's just Eid, the celebration’. I couldn’t stay in Dandenong. I went back home to Fitzroy. I saw the letter and I believed it. For three years I’d look in my mailbox every day and couldn't find anything. Finally, I opened it and I saw the letter.”

But the joy was short-lived. “The very next day my dear friend Ali (Sarwari) was in an accident and passed away in New Zealand. I was very happy that I got my visa and was able to go to New Zealand to be with his family and send his body back to Iran for burial. I did all of that. I was really happy. Finally, I was able to do something. I didn't want to have to do this but finally I was able to do something.”
Why had it taken so long to process his application? Arif lodged a formal complaint with ASIO. When he returned from Iran months later, he received a letter from a senior official at the security organisation saying he was regarded as a high risk. “The immigration case officer said, you say you’re nobody. You’re just a normal person. Why are you talking to the media? What is your background? You didn’t tell us all there is to know. Why don’t you do like other people and keep your head down and go to the abattoir and work as a meat worker? This was the reason I believe. I don’t know.”

A young woman contacted him, saying she was writing an honours thesis about refugees. He agreed to talk to her. “We went down to the Fitzroy flats park. She asked me all sorts of questions. Finally it clicked.

“You are taping me,” he told her. “You didn’t ask my permission. Who are you?”

“I don’t need to reveal my identity to you,” was the response.

He told her she could not use the tape recorder until he knew who she was.

“I’m working for an agency. You know about it. Don’t ask me anymore.”

“I said, I have to find out what agency. And she said, I’m working for ASIO. I said, why didn’t you tell me? I would have told you everything that you needed to know.”

ASIO eventually notified him that it had completed its investigation. It had found no irregularities in the handling of his case. He was told he could take the matter further if he chose to do so.

“And I said, forget it. I’ve got my visa.”

He had won the right to remain in Australia but only after threatening legal action against a Federal Minister who once welcomed him into her office in Parliament and, as he recalled it, reassured him with simple words and a gesture. Vanstone resigned from the Senate in 2007. She served as Australian Ambassador to Italy until 2010. She was presenting a show on ABC Radio National when I emailed her in July 2014. She replied with an apology weeks later. Her memory was pretty good, she wrote, but going back more than a decade was “just a tad too far”.

Arif remembered: “Sarah Noori spoke to her. She (Vanstone) asked, why are you crying? She said their application was rejected. They were going to send them back to Afghanistan.
She said, I certainly feel I have been alive in the three years I've spent in Australia. She (Vanstone) said stop, come here, no one can send you back - and touched her hair.”

Notes:

Chapter Five:


Chapter Nine:


The Exegesis

Introduction

One evening in June 2000 an Iraqi refugee took me to meet one of the first people to reach Melbourne on three-year “protection” visas. As described in Chapter Four of the artefact, the young man from Najaf, south of Baghdad, had arrived in Melbourne days earlier, after being held in Port Hedland detention centre in remote Western Australia, and flown to Tasmania before joining relatives in Melbourne. The day of our interview, he visited a special language school but said he had been politely told his visa did not enable him to study there. As we prepared to leave after an hour or so, he turned to me. “Before I left Port Hedland, my friends were hoping I was going to tell everything,” the man who had brought me here translated from Arabic. “They asked me, ‘Please. Let the people know about our problem’. And now I haven’t said one per cent; nothing.”

I noted in a report I wrote for a Sunday newspaper at the time that, as he said this, he let his hands drop. Did I imagine this? It seemed to me then, clearly, that he despaired for himself and others who remained behind the camp wire somewhere in the Pilbara region. He seemed, at that moment, defeated by the enormity of the challenge to communicate and his failure to do so despite my persistent questioning. As I have noted in the book, the June 2000 encounter with the young Iraqi man troubled me. Then I knew nothing of Immigration Department restrictions effectively preventing journalists from interviewing people detained under immigration law. I don’t know if I was aware by then of the fact that temporary protection visa holders were denied access to 510 hours of federally-funded language classes. As I write in the artefact: “Just a few months earlier, a book in which I’d explored the question of personal culpability in the apartheid-era South Africa of my youth had been published. I told myself as I sat in a newsroom in the heart of metropolitan Australia almost 20 years after I migrated here, I didn’t want to be looking back in a decade or so worrying over the way I had squandered the privileged role as journalist reporting on the asylum seekers to tell what I could of what Aimer A. and others had endured.”

It may be unfair to do so. But it is tempting to contrast the dejection of the young man from Najaf with the spiritedness of a group of asylum seekers and activists I later encountered who took on the challenge (as Aimer A. may well have gone on to do elsewhere) to find a way to articulate their plight through storytelling in the theatrical production known as Kan
Yama Kan. Arabic for Once upon A Time, it was created in part as a contemporary version of the story of Scheherazade, the vizier’s daughter who told stories to stay alive and save herself from her husband the King who would marry a virgin in the community one day and have executed her the next.

AS Byatt (1999) wrote in The New York Times some years ago of a contemporary context: “During the bombardment of Sarajevo in 1994, a group of theatre workers in Amsterdam commissioned tales, from different European writers, to be read aloud, simultaneously, in theatres in Sarajevo itself and all over Europe, every Friday night, until the fighting ended. This project pitted storytelling against destruction, imaginative life against real death. It may not have saved lives, but it was a form of living energy. It looked back to The Thousand and One Nights and forwards to the millennium. It was called Scheherazade 2001.”

The players in Kan Yama Kan eventually went to Canberra in late 2003 to save themselves by telling their stories from what seemed certain return to countries where their lives might be at risk. Robin Laurie, Kan Yama Kan’s dramaturg, has likened the production to the Scheherazade story.

This thesis examines the way refugee theatre activists responded to negative media coverage of asylum seekers in Australia. It also reflects on the relative lack of journalists' perspectives in academic debates over the issue, which were highly critical of the profession. These linked problems are addressed in two ways - a non-fiction book of 25 chapters called A Knock at the Door and an accompanying exegesis. The book examines theatre activism as a counter-narrative to the prevailing media coverage, which many saw as influenced by Howard Government attempts to reduce sympathy for asylum seekers.

This study is informed by the Practice Led Approach in which a reflexive journal acts as detailed in Chapter One of this exegesis as a “bridge between the two components of the PhD” (Arnold, 2007).

The exegesis analyses the method and inspiration for the primary text, examining the problem of media coverage from the perspective of a practising journalist who covered the issue extensively during this period. I saw in the theatre production some parallels to the possibilities in journalistic practice. As I note in the artefact: "the news page was my stage."
The thesis uses auto-ethnography, a qualitative research method also detailed in Chapter One which analyses the personal “to understand the cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011).

I have written thousands of stories in more than three decades in journalism in Australia. Years after I first reported on it, I remained intrigued by the theatre-based political campaign coordinated through an inner Melbourne learning centre that opened its doors to hundreds of Iraqis, Afghans, Iranians and other TPV-holders after they had been turned away elsewhere because their visas excluded them from federally-funded language classes. The travelling theatrical production featuring song and storytelling to articulate little known stories was central in a campaign to influence politicians and media in Canberra.

Here is a heroic David-and-Goliath story of defiance and determination against the odds. On one level, it has to do with theatre as activism and I explore the influence of the late Augusto Boal, whose approach provided a theoretical underpinning to the Melbourne-based theatre project. But on another level, this is a story about the Australian media in the early 2000s, told through a journalistic lens. The thesis weaves these two narrative threads by presenting this story of the theatre group from a particular journalist’s perspective.

Why focus on a theatrical production? The simple answer is that had this activism involved a football team I would have written about football – or any other activity for that matter.

Early in A Knock at the Door, I owned up: “A belated confession: I can count the number of times I’ve been to the theatre in decades in Australia on one hand - three or four fingers at most. Had I not written about Kan Yama Kan, it’s unlikely I would have been in the packed crowd at the Trades Hall theatre on opening night. But sitting there that night I found myself thinking everyone should see this. Maybe it was this: I saw in the theatre production some parallel to the possibilities in journalistic practice. The news page was my stage. The challenge was to tell stories to tens of thousands of potential readers. In a sense my job, as I saw it, was to make the strangers less strange.”

To put it simply, the asylum seekers and others involved were telling stories that informed audiences about a shared humanity at a time when academic studies suggest we in the media were not. The studies that question the media role in reporting on asylum seekers in the early 2000s neglect to seek out the perspective of journalists. This two-part thesis
attempts to provide a perspective on journalistic practice of the time that is so far not available in academic research.

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This reflexive exegesis outlines the process of my understanding, the research involved and use of a non-fiction narrative in an account of attempts by asylum seekers and their supporters to use theatre to tell their stories at a time when media coverage was undermined. The exegesis consists of five chapters - plus a conclusion - concerning background literature, methodology and narrative structure in an attempt to provide some insights on the media’s role and performance in the early 2000s not yet available in academic research.

The chapters below contribute to this argument in these ways:

Chapter one explores the rationale for the thesis. The chapter is an inquiry into the origins and approach. It sets out the significance in the context of scholarly research pointing to a temporary surrender of the perceived Fourth Estate role. It sets out the motivations for my approach to reporting on asylum seekers including the influence of growing up in apartheid-era South Africa from which I migrated in the early 1980s. It briefly touches on the difference in emphasis to books by others including journalists Gordon (2005), Marr and Wilkinson (2004), Mares (2002) and O’Neill (2008). The chapter examines the impact of detention on perceptions of Australia and a sense of national identity in writings of Tom Keneally, Anna Funder and philosopher Raymond Gaita and reflects on the omission of the perspective of practising journalists from a selection of writings on asylum seekers co-edited by Keneally with Rosie Scott (2007). The chapter describes what some academics, activists and others including Pickering (2001), Klocker and Dunn (2003), Leach and Mansouri (2003), Romano (2007) and O’Doherty and Lecouteur (2007) have written about media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees in the early 2000s, discusses the play Kan Yama Kan as an example of activist theatre and, briefly, theoretical influences including the work of Brazilians Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire. It provides a brief introduction to my approach to writing the artefact, including the choice of title and structure, citing in particular, Franklin (1994).
Chapter two explores the craft and context of ongoing changes to an artefact that has evolved significantly over the years. It provides insights on attempts to engage the reader with a tension between complication and resolution. It explains the use of a device measuring time to the final performance in Parliament House and subsequent encounter between asylum seekers and then Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone, how I rewrote incidents quoted as scenes, minimised digression, deleted some characters, retained others and increased focus on the theatre activism to ensure that “story action and progression is always flowing beneath him.” (Blundell, 1988) It outlines strategies to reduce a draft from more than 96,000 words to over 67,000; 26 chapters to 14. The chapter looks at the continuing relevance of the narrative that focuses on an early 2000s activism at a time of worsening conditions for people seeking asylum in Australia since the Gillard government re-introduced offshore processing in 2012 and Kevin Rudd, soon after being returned as Prime Minister by a struggling Labor government the following year, announced that no-one arriving by boat would gain asylum here. It cites April 2017 comment by a Kurdish journalist on Manus Island and the implications of Immigration Minister Peter Dutton’s announcement the following month of an October 1 2017 deadline for 7500 people desperately seeking legal support to lodge protection applications. It explores efforts to avoid intrusion in the authorial presence in a project that uses the method of autoethnography to analyse the personal “to understand the cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011) and reasons behind the decision to address the book to a broad audience rather than present it as an academic monograph and the impact of the author’s activism on the integrity of his journalism.

Chapter three outlines my approach to the methodology and the influence of the Practice Led Research approach and the use of a reflexive journal as a “bridge” between artefact and exegesis (Arnold, 2007 and 2011). The chapter explores the importance of the qualitative method of autoethnography that confirmed the validity of drawing on my own experiences in addressing the problem of the near absence of journalists’ perspectives in academic research on media coverage of the issue. It cites theorists Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) who describe autoethnography as a research method which analyses the personal “to understand the cultural experience”, Plummer (2009) on the importance of the first person and Chang (2008) on other aspects in the use of the method. The chapter explores the
impact of my own flawed preconception and assumption about others. It discusses the value of semi-structured interviews (Devine 2007), approaches to interviewing by noted interviewers Gay Talese, Studs Terkel and Bill Moyers. It considers the role and responsibilities of journalists and ethical questions raised in the presentation of the asylum seekers who agreed to be part of this project. The chapter concludes with an outline of other sources including audio visual footage, scripts, a visiting Fulbright student’s typed account of the trip to Canberra with the players and others and varied archival material obtained from the offices of Fitzroy Learning Network and those behind the production. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the value of the reflexive journal to the project.

Chapter four, the first of two focussing on the impact of journalistic practice on the artefact, explores the neglect of media perspectives, citing Kan Yama Kan as a case study on media priorities. It speculates on the likely consequence of the privileging of “hard news” (White, 1996). The chapter provides an account of the extensive scholarly research that overwhelmingly pointed to flaws in media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees in the early 2000s including those cited in chapter one and others including Slattery (2003), Macken-Horarik (2003), Gale (2004) and O’Doherty and Augoustinos (2008). It discusses why this literature is in itself limited by the frequent neglect of the perspective of media practitioners. It speculates on the cost of ignoring the journalistic voice and, citing Gawenda (Muller and Gawenda 2011) on research on coverage of the Black Saturday bushfire to further discuss the failure to engage with practitioners that might have helped encourage improvements to journalistic practice.

Chapter five begins by citing a parody of a media interview in the play, Kan Yama Kan. It outlines some of the literature on government attempts to undermine domestic sympathy for asylum seekers, claims of specific incidents of media failure and perceived acquiescence to government “spin”. It cites Kevin (2004) on media manipulation, Saxton (2003) on the depiction of Muslims and nationalist discourse and Corlett (2005) on coverage of the Bakhtiyari family, among others, to further explore journalistic practice, values and priorities. The chapter continues discussion on why the use of the authorial voice and personal reflection will help fill a gap in scholarly inquiry by telling the story of a theatre production which told the asylum seekers’ stories onstage through the particular journalistic (and migrant) lens. It explores the perceived performance of journalists (Rosen, 1999), the
extent to which professionalism might or might not be undermined by activism. It discusses interpretations of media coverage and responsibilities by theorists including John Stuart Mill, Joseph Schumpeter, Jurgen Habermas, Antonio Gramsci and Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky as well as the importance of articulating historic context in reportage (White and White, 1983) of longstanding opposition to non-Anglo migration. It cites the mid-1850s opposition to Chinese migration (Markus 1979); the arrival in Darwin of a fishing boat transporting 181 Vietnamese refugees a week before the 1977 election (Rodd 2007) and interviews with asylum seekers on their response to media coverage in the early 2000s (Leach and Mansouri 2003).

Chapter six explores the background to the theatre activism as counter-narrative and response to A Knock at the Door at a language centre in Fitzroy that initially intrigued me about this story. This chapter briefly outlines the extent of theatre activism in response to the Howard government approach to refugees and asylum seekers (Hazou, 2010). It further explores the relevance of theoretical approaches of Freire and Boal. It discusses the denial of language as a theme as articulated by Primo Levi (in Toaff and Ascarelli 2001), the poetry of exiled South African poet Breyten Breytenbach and a project to teach the indigenous Australian Pitjantjatjara language in Melbourne. It looks at some parallels between theatre and journalism with particular reference to the theory and practice of Boal, citing his method, Newspaper Theatre (Boal 2008). It reflects on the influence of South African theatre activism in the apartheid era I encountered while watching productions by Fugard, Kente and Mtw and Ngema and the relevance of this theatre activism to the Australian experience (Gilbert, 2013).

The conclusion contrasts Kan Yama Kan with a 2015 production in which a Sri Lankan asylum seeker is played by an actor with extensive acting experience in Australia and overseas and a Masters’ degree from the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) in Sydney. I note that even if The Process succeeded to any extent in Boal’s terms as a “weapon” (Boal 2008) against oppression none in the small cast were in any way engaged personally in what Paulo Freire described as “reflective participation in the act of liberation” (Freire 1996). The chapter cites opening night reviews of Kan Yama Kan in The Age and The Australian which highlighted its role as theatre activism rather than conventional activism. It draws some parallels between the way in which the production evolved for the players and
the way my understanding of the book’s structure and central narrative changed while writing. It also shows how the approach to structure is relevant to the thematic preoccupation throughout of *A Knock at the Door*. The chapters cite Orwell (2004) on acknowledging political bias and show how in writing the artefact, *A Knock at the Door*, I was engaged in research of a kind described by Carter (2004) as “unavoidably creative” – seeking answers to questions related to media coverage and theatre as counter-narrative. I describe the extent to which autoethnography was a key to analysing the personal “to understand the cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011).
Chapter One: The origins of this project and approach

The motivations for my approach

The scholarly work on media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees in the early 2000s is significant. It points to a temporary surrender, at the very least, of the Fourth Estate role and commitment to the public interest. While working for The Sunday Age at a time when I held a de facto ethnic affairs round (along with general reportage on various issues as required), it occurred to me that I had until then regarded the profession as a way to earn a living while writing. But as I began to report on asylum seekers, I at last felt a strong sense of vocation - some sense of purpose that went beyond storytelling and news coverage. Perhaps because I am a migrant, I have been drawn to the stories of refugees and other marginalised people including Indigenous Australians. I had told these stories whenever possible since my first newspaper job in Australia in the early 1980s. But it was not until the early 2000s that I found my place as a journalist, reporting on refugees in particular, and subsequently a loss of purpose on my return to more general journalism duties. In writing the artefact, I was not atoning for personal failings as a journalist – though I no doubt have as much to atone for in decades in the profession as any of my peers - but returning to the narrative that had given me a sense of purpose. In this chapter I outline why I undertook this project and how I went about it.

Months after quitting my job at the Melbourne broadsheet, The Age, in July 2009, I was approached by a publisher to write a book about activists and asylum seekers during the early 2000s. I started writing about asylum seekers in detention around the time of publication of my 2000 memoir, The Wild Almond Line, set in apartheid-era South Africa from which I had migrated two decades earlier. I believed then, and now, that as a journalist I had a role to play in alerting the Australian public. I did not want to be questioning my failure to report the treatment of desperate people in Australia. The knock at the door of the title refers to the motivation behind a decision by workers at an inner Melbourne learning centre to provide English language classes to asylum seekers released from remote
detention centres on three-year temporary protection visas at a time when they were excluded from language classes available to other refugees and migrants. But as one of those featured in the book, author Arnold Zable, points out, this was a time when each of us in our way faced a metaphoric knock, a challenge, in the way we did or did not respond to the outsider. In my case, it was as a journalist presented with the opportunity to convey to readers the shared humanity of people kept apart in detention, and in the community. It would be self-serving, to say the least, if I was to suggest here that I did so in an exemplary manner.

I have no doubt that had my reportage on asylum seekers been scrutinised by scholars as some of my peers’ coverage cited in this exegesis, it would have been found to be flawed, regardless of my intention. I would no doubt be found to have fallen short of my own ideals.

When I left the newspaper, I had not yet read the extensive academic literature on media coverage at the time but strongly suspected that with exceptions we had fallen short of our ideal for the profession. As discussed in Chapter Three of this exegesis, American media academic Jay Rosen has written on the perception among journalists he knows as “serious people serving the public good.” (Rosen 1999, p.1)

As I researched the academic studies, I found my suspicions confirmed that we had not served the public good as effectively as we might and, to the extent we had failed to do so, fulfilled our professional duties as journalists. As I read on, I realised that the research, though convincing, was limited by the failure to seek out the insights of practitioners – and did not do justice to the inevitable complexity associated with reportage dictated by deadline pressures and other demands. It occurred to me at one stage this was tantamount to perusing the Royal Commission into the October 1970 collapse of the Westgate Bridge only to discover there was no attempt to seek out the opinion of engineers and others responsible for the design and construction.

The subject matter of the artefact is a group of asylum seekers and their supporters who resorted to theatre performance in order to make known to the Australian public what they were experiencing. In the exegesis, on the other hand, the unit of analysis is the book, *A Knock at the Door*, a reflection on how it came to be. There is clearly and intentionally reflection in both artefact and exegesis. But there is also clearly a difference in the nature of
this reflection. In the book it has to do with context of the theatre activism; in the exegesis with the method and inspiration of the book.

For decades since immigrating in early 1982, I maintained a naive confidence in this adopted country even if it was gnawed away by an increasing insight on the dispossession of Indigenous Australians, the tragedy of the Stolen Generation, deaths in custody. I hadn’t paid enough attention to the enduring legacy of the White Australia Policy or thought of the likely impact of Labor’s early 1990s introduction of mandatory detention for Indo-Chinese refugees. Historian Geoffrey Blainey’s misgivings on the extent of migration seemed to reflect the concerns of an increasingly irrelevant determination to hold to a predominantly Anglo-Australian past. I thought the emergence of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation an aberration even after persuading its Victorian representative to take me on the road to report on his appearance at a rally at a country town. Surely, it was peripheral, a slightly more mainstream manifestation of the madness of far-right League of Rights whose meeting in another country town I covered for a newspaper story days after the One Nation rally.

When choosing to report on aspects of migration, I thought I would be celebrating a big-hearted post-war migrant country and the diversity that made me feel so much at home from the day I arrived in Sydney in February, 1982. I would not have believed then the scenes we’d see on TV decades later at the 2005 Cronulla riots.

I was happily seduced; could not believe my good fortune to be blissfully far from the darker impulses of the past. Months after settling here, I sat drinking beer with writer Tom Keneally at his home overlooking Sydney’s northern beaches in a lengthy interview for a local newspaper soon after he won the Booker Prize for his non-fiction novel about a Nazi Party member who saved 1200 Jews in the Holocaust, reassured by what he had to say about the unlikelihood of such horror occurring in this country. He made it sound all too absurd. And it was.

“Imagine if the Holocaust happened in Australia,” the author told me. “Imagine if someone said, all Australians of Scottish descent had to die for social, cultural, economic and political reasons. This is no more preposterous than what Hitler said...” It was preposterous. Nothing like this could surely happen here, nor hopefully ever will. Keneally told me then that there was too much anarchic individualism in Australia for the sectional hatred that had made
possible in Europe the targeting of a particular minority. “You have no tradition of that in Australia,” he said. “You could never get guards for concentration camps in Australia unless you paid them time and-a-half and, God bless them, that is one of the finest things about being Australian. They’d say: ‘You want us to... God, I don’t know about that... I’m just an electrician. I’m not going to drop cyanide... Anyhow, listen, I’m going to a barbecue...”

This was the notion of Australia I wanted so much to believe in when I happily surrendered my South African passport on becoming a citizen and had the suburb, not town or country of origin, noted in my Australian passport. As far as I could see, even if I’d highlight whenever possible the lamentable situation for Indigenous Australians, this was a society bravely coping with near unprecedented diversity and I would celebrate it.

But something changed. I had reported on detainees held in remote centres around Australia. But I had done so through supporters from churches opposed to government policies and other intermediaries. Within weeks of the arrival of the first to be released in Melbourne in 2000, I was meeting desperate people with compelling stories that needed to be told.

**The differentiation between my work and others**

Though the ostensible focus then is on a theatre production, *A Knock at the Door* is a journalist’s account and explores the theatre activism in the context of its role at a time when media was compromised. So while the narrative relates the events up to and beyond a theatrical performance inside Parliament House in Canberra, this is a book in which the preoccupation throughout is also with the media and its role. It raises questions not just about ways in which some in the media fell short of the role to which it aspires, but the validity of that role, the extent to which legitimate news values can be undermined by a fear of a perception of activism and the way in which a certain kind of journalism makes the media particularly vulnerable to cynical manipulation by those on whom practitioners are most dependent for information.

It might seem odd to seek to explore concerns over journalism by writing a book about theatre. But the book tells of a modest theatre production that succeeded as counter-narrative at a time when the Australian media failed, or at least fell short of its ideals for
itself. The aims of the activists behind Kan Yama Kan was not dissimilar to those journalists who remained determined to seek out stories that enabled them to “humanise” at a time when it seems authorities were determined to vilify and demonise.

I consider in these pages the differences and similarities between media coverage of refugees and asylum seekers and the way in which they were able to tell their own stories onstage. I observe in the relationships formed through Fitzroy Learning Network and Kan Yama Kan as well as an earlier theatrical production, the extent to which they influenced “the struggle for their liberation” (Freire 1996, p.31) by asylum seekers who settled here.

The theatre-based political campaign provided a relatively unmediated forum through which a marginalised people could assert their humanity and participate as fully as possible in Australian society. “In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform.” (Freire 1996, p.31).

In Chapter Eight of the artefact, I explore how apartheid policies sought to enforce a closed world by enforcing segregation in theatre. I show also how theatre defied that segregation and challenged domination. Theatre helped manifest what was repressed. The asylum seekers among the players in Kan Yama Kan were able to use the language to which they were officially denied access to open their closed world and transform their situation.

Veteran English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher Carmel Davies, who initiated and co-wrote Without My Mother’s Hand (first staged before the arrival of the TPVs) and Kan Yama Kan (focussed exclusively on the TPVs), was inspired by Augusto Boal, who founded the Theatre of the Oppressed school using theatre as a political and educational tool to promote understanding. Davies and other activists involved faced the daunting task of empowering actors to convey their story in a language (English) they struggled to master, at a time when the Fitzroy Network was compensating for the lack of access to federally-funded language classes. Though mediated by organisers including dramaturg/script writer Robin Laurie, a few writers and professional actors, the asylum seekers were increasingly able to articulate their own stories, as their command of the language grew.

In this exegesis I highlight the work of several authors - including journalists Michael Gordon, David Marr and Marian Wilkinson, Peter Mares and Margot O’Neill - who have
explored media coverage of asylum seekers in the early 2000s. Each has made a significant contribution to articulating perspectives missing in the academic literature. What differentiates my book from book-length non-fiction is this: no other author, as far as I am aware, does so by focussing on theatre activism as a counter-narrative. In doing so, I have sought also to place incidents of marginal interest to the media and recalled mostly by those involved, on centre stage.

What other writers have said about the impact on their sense of national identity

In June 2004, Tom Keneally wrote to the then immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone. He said that he had been deputised by the audience and a panel at a Sydney Literary Festival event weeks earlier after a session on a collection of detainee writing he’d co-edited called Another Country. He had been asked to present a unanimous motion to her that read in part: “That, on the basis of a mass of expert Australian and international opinion in the matter, compulsory and unlimited detention be abandoned, as deleterious both to those detained and to Australian values of compassion...”(Scott and Keneally 2007, pp. 118-119)

In a key scene in A Knock at the Door, Vanstone, who replied to Keneally reassuring him that Australia was indeed welcoming toward refugees, hosts a November 2003 meeting in her parliamentary office with several players in Kan Yama Kan. Some were buoyed by her words and gesture towards a distraught teenage Hazara girl at the meeting. Vanstone would years later tell me she had no memory of the meeting.

The treatment of asylum seekers had a profound effect. “Some Australians are deeply saddened by the hostility that many of their fellow Australians have shown towards asylum seekers,” philosopher Raymond Gaita writes in a later book co-edited by Rosie Scott and Tom Keneally. “Confronted with the aggressive nationalism that such hostility often expresses, some people never again want to hear talk of love of country... Others are ashamed of the hostility shown by their fellow countrymen and women to asylum seekers, but their shame presupposes that their identities have been formed by their attachment to the country. They voice that identity when they use ‘we’ to express national fellowship rather than merely to record the fact that they belong with other Australians to a national group.” (Scott and Tom Keneally 2013, p.90)
Elsewhere in the book, subtitled *Writings on Asylum Seekers*, Anna Funder writes of the impact of events including the Tampa affair, SIEVX drownings, Children Overboard misinformation by government, detention of asylum seekers on remote islands, and indefinite detention without adequate legal recourse: “... These events were catastrophic for the people involved. But I still can’t quite account for the depth of my disillusion-bordering-on-despair. I am a little ashamed of it. Part of me would like to blame a certain dewy-eyed, progressive-but-patriotic, inner-city Whitlamite 1970s childhood. Or perhaps the residual lawyer’s faith in human rights standards in the face of massive, real-world evidence of their breach (evidence I eventually left the law to write about). Or even some kind of quasi-inherited, late-enlightenment conviction that countries and human beings are, essentially, on the improve.” (Scott and Keneally 2013, p.212).

There are familiar names among the contributors. But apart from Geraldine Brooks, who went on to become an award-winning novelist, and Zable, who writes occasional journalism, it is worth noting that none of more than 20 writers commissioned were practising journalists. This is interesting in that it might suggest that the co-editors saw no need to include a perspective from within the mainstream media.

Tom Keneally writes in the anthology: “… As a result of (Malcolm) Fraser’s humanity, I recently saw a Vietnamese boat person of that era telling his story of escape to a class of schoolchildren at the City of Sydney Library. The massive majority of us now respect his narrative. His journey is a saga. But we don’t respect the stories of contemporary asylum seekers. They are not depicted by government, or by most media, as admirable and desperate escapades. They are not described as being ‘game as Ned Kelly’, as in fact they must be. They are depicted as evasive chancers who have gone to the trouble of trying to impose on our better natures.” (Scott and Keneally 2013, pp. 230-231)

**What academics, activists and others have said about media performance in covering the topic**

In the book I cite Julian Burnside, QC, who partly funded the Canberra theatre action. He wrote in late 2003 of the response to the “fourth wave” of boat people to arrive in Australia: “…If the tragedy of our present regime is told dispassionately decades from now, the silence
of the press will be seen as part of our national disgrace.” (Burnside 2007, p.82) Burnside did not cite sources and it is not clear if his impression was largely anecdotal. But as outlined later, the role of media coverage of asylum seekers who arrived between 1999 and 2001 is called into question repeatedly in scholarly research.

Academic studies found that some reportage implied that asylum seekers were a threat to national security and stability (Romano 2007). Other studies found that a reliance on government statements and spokespeople contributed to negative perceptions of asylum seekers (Klocker and Dunn 2003) or that deliberate manipulations of language and media stereotyping reinforced government rhetoric (Leach and Mansouri 2003). Other studies concluded that journalists played on xenophobic fears (Macken-Horarik 2003) or used emotive words and phrases such as “floods”, “waves”, “tides” and “illegal foreigners” as well as words associated with war and crime (Pickering 2001) and nationalism (O’Doherty and Lecouteur 2007).

In one of the earliest papers on media coverage on asylum seekers in the period, Monash University criminology professor Sharon Pickering, then at Charles Sturt University’s School of Social Science and Liberal Studies, analysed media discourses on asylum seekers and refugees by investigating coverage of Brisbane’s Courier Mail and The Sydney Morning Herald over a three-year period. In a paper titled “Common Sense and Original Deviancy: News Discourses and Asylum Seekers in Australia” (2000 updated 2001), Pickering argues that refugees and asylum seekers “have been routinely constructed not only as a ‘problem’ population but as a ‘deviant’ population in relation to the integrity of the nation state, race and disease”, Pickering notes that “as I suspiciously read the newspaper coverage I have no real way of interrogating what the individual writers meant…”

As a journalist, it was instructive to be reminded of the impact of our words in a paper on refugee perspectives on government and media stereotyping by Michael Leach and Fethi Mansouri. Their essay, Strange Words (2003), “focuses specifically on the emotional responses of TPV holders to the government-inspired stereotypes which represent them as ‘illegals’, ‘queue-jumpers’, ‘cashed-up immigrants’ and other dehumanising labels” (Leach and Mansouri 2003, p.9). “These expressions that we hear from radio stations, and other media increase the depression that we suffer,” says a man identified as Hasan. “We came here to save our lives...all these expressions really hurt us” (Leach and Mansouri 2003, p.9)
Theoretical influences

In this exegesis I cite Augusto Boal, Paulo Freire and others to explain how the theatrical production became a focus for reflection by the marginalised (oppressed) through which the players mastered the language of the oppressor and that though the production was a collaboration between activists and asylum seekers, it was the latter who took control finally, asserting their humanity, and ours.

Paulo Freire was forced into exile after a 1964 coup that is said to have been caused in part by “the extraordinary success of (his) adult literacy program” (Kirylo 2012, p.122). James D. Kirylo writes that by law only those considered literate in Brazil at the time were allowed to vote, “which were the overwhelming majority represented by the elite, landowners and those of the conservative classes…The middle and upper class were fearful because they saw the potential of a major power shift taking place. Hence the coup shut Freire’s work down sending him into exile for nearly 16 years.” (Kirylo 2012, p.122)

Freire wrote from exile that his 1970 book Pedagogy of the Oppressed, presented aspects of a pedagogy “which must be forged with not for, the oppressed…in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes the oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation. And in the struggle this pedagogy will be made and remade”. (Freire, 1996 edition, p.30) The theatre production facilitated the necessary reflection in the players’ “struggle for liberation”.

Augusto Boal has in the preface to the 1974 edition written of Theatre of the Oppressed of theatre as “a very efficient weapon”. “For this reason one must fight for it. For this reason the ruling classes strive to take permanent hold of the theatre and utilise it as a tool for domination….But the theatre can also be a weapon for liberation. For that, it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms. Change is imperative.” (Boal 2008 edition, p.XX111)

Boal writes elsewhere, in The Rainbow of Desire, of changes in performer and audience. “In the beginning, actor and spectator coexisted in the same person, the point at which they were separated, when some specialised as actors and others as spectators, marks the birth of the theatrical forms we know today,” he wrote. (Boal 1995, p.14) “Also born at the time
were 'theatres', architectural constructions intended to make sacred this division, this specialisation. The profession of 'actor' takes its first bow.

“The theatrical profession, which belongs to a few, should not hide the existence and permanence of the theatrical vocation, which belongs to all. Theatre is a vocation for all human beings: it is the true nature of humanity.”

In a chapter in *Theatre of the Oppressed* entitled Poetics of the Oppressed, Boal writes of several methods including what he termed Newspaper Theatre (Boal 2008, p. 121) in which players explored innovative ways of relating the news of the day. I outline the method in a later chapter in which I contend that the play, *Kan Yama Kan*, functioned in a parallel sense to convey news. The relevance of theatre in the book is as a medium to which desperate people resorted to at a time when the academic studies overwhelmingly suggest that many of us journalists were not doing our job.

**The artefact’s title and early aims for it**

The book takes its title from an encounter described at the start of a first draft that I shifted further into the narrative. It was the response to *A Knock at the Door* at Napier Street, Fitzroy that initially intrigued me about this story. In a sense, it is the archetypal hero’s journey outlined by the mythologist Joseph Campbell – one, which he said, begins with “the call”. When Anne Horrigan-Dixon and her associates opened the door to hundreds of asylum seekers, they were risking the antagonism of their peers. Some people I interviewed for this book told of friendships lost and new friendships made.

My initial interest in writing this book was to celebrate some who rose to the challenge – acknowledging that I might well not have done so - despite social pressures and, in the case of those associated with Fitzroy Learning Network in the early 2000s, forged a new community of sorts with the play, *Kan Yama Kan*, central to their sense of belonging. “The call is to leave a certain social situation, move into your own loneliness and find the jewel, the centre that’s impossible to find when you’re socially engaged,” Campbell said. (in Osborn Diane K, 1991, pp.77-78)

The people associated with the network helped to ensure more than friendship and camaraderie but an alternative community. Desperate people fearful of being returned were made to feel secure enough to articulate their stories to the wider community and in
at least one case, as experienced by Iraqi Aoham al Dujali, confront what she perceived as inappropriate constraints and break on through from the particular social group within which she had been raised to embrace the communal values espoused by those associated with the play.

As a journalist, I was privileged on occasion to record stories about ordinary people who did extraordinary things. The opening of the door at Fitzroy Learning Network might seem less so than, for instance, the achievements noted in the book of some including Dutch migrant Nell van Rangerooy I interviewed for Fairfax’s Good Weekend in the 1980s, who with her late husband had put themselves and her family at risk of execution by the Gestapo for harbouring five Jews in three years of Nazi occupation of Holland.

No one would pretend that supporters of asylum seekers in Australia in the early 2000s put themselves at anywhere near the risk let alone some anti-apartheid activists in the country from which I migrated in the early 1980s. But as I consider what it was that attracted me to this particular story – the opening of the door that led all the way to the heart of government in Canberra – it seems that it has to do not just with the courage of the asylum seekers but those who somehow found it within themselves to rise to the challenge to welcome strangers at a time when many in the community were swayed against them by government rhetoric echoed in the media at times.
Chapter Two: Crafting the narrative

I struggled to come up with a workable structure and discarded or reworked my first attempt—six or seven draft chapters—in which Anne Horrigan-Dixon was the central character. As I had it then, the book opened with the opening of the door at Fitzroy Learning Network and her response to the first few Hazara men who have come to request English language classes. The problem with this as I later saw it was that I was effectively beginning the narrative in such a way that I was resolving a complication when the story had hardly begun.

A colleague at *The Age* once loaned me a book by the Pulitzer prize-winning non-fiction writer Jon Franklin. I have found it difficult to put into practice his lessons on structure. But it proved useful in conceiving form for this book. He wrote: “The straightforward definition of a story is as follows: A story consists of a sequence of actions that occur when a sympathetic character encounters a complicating situation that he confronts and solves”. (Franklin 1994, p. 71) There is a clear sense in which the artefact resolves a particular complication—the unlikely journey to Canberra and attempt by asylum seekers to communicate their stories to political leaders and media. “Impossible!” Mohammad al-Janabi says when Michael Aboujundi suggests it in Chapter One. The challenge to tell their stories and in doing so communicate their plight is the central complication. They succeed not just in performing inside Parliament House or in meetings with politicians including the Immigration Minister but in a growing sense of engagement in a society in which they were detained on arrival and excluded through factors including limited access to language.

“To be dramatic, the complication has got to matter deeply to the character involved,” Franklin wrote (1994, p. 77). Horrigan-Dixon had seemed a likely protagonist. She cared deeply. The asylum seekers’ welfare mattered to her. In another sense, she was not ideal because she starts out as a believer and never wavers. “In the best stories, the odyssey from complication to resolution changes the character profoundly,” Franklin wrote (Franklin 1994, p 89). She was heroic, defiant to the end, but not profoundly changed by the events. Then again, the artefact is an “underdog story”, in which there are often two kinds of protagonists: the underdog character/s who rise to various challenges, and the character/s who support the underdog/s with the latter (in this case Horrigan-Dixon) not necessarily undergoing any major changes. An example of this is *Cosi*, the 1996 film and play by Louis
Nowra on which it is based in which a young theatre director helps mentally ill people stage Mozart’s opera, *Cosi Fan Tutte*.

William E. Blundell has written (Blundell 1988, p.100) that the writer’s task is “to keep the reader ever conscious that he is on a river, not a lake, that the current of story action and progression is always flowing beneath him.” To help ensure that potential readers remain engaged throughout, I reduced the book by almost a third, from more than 96,000 words to more than 67,000 and from 26 chapters to 14 chapters. In an early draft I had drawn more heavily on related material from my own reportage over the years. I pulled back on this and kept as closely as possible to the story of the emergence of the theatrical productions, *Without my Mother’s Hand* and *Kan Yama Kan*, following the latter the way to Canberra and beyond.

I reviewed the narrative, determined to find ways to ensure the flow to which Blundell alludes. I sought to address this problem using a device suggested by one of my supervisors - the intermittent mention of the number of months/weeks/days/hours to “curtain-up”, the term used to describe the moment when a curtain is raised at the start of a performance, in this case the performance inside Parliament House in Canberra. With this in mind, I begin the prologue: Thirty-six hours to curtain-up. The players are onstage in a small theatre in the capital. They will enter Federal Parliament the next day. Chapter One takes us to the beginning of the back story and begins: Forty-four months to curtain-up. Though I do not begin each chapter with this measure, I remind readers intermittently how much time remains until the show begins in Parliament House. As time draws closer to the final performance, I mention the duration to curtain-up more frequently to increase the sense of urgency.

The last chapter, which takes place almost a decade later, begins with the term “curtain call”, when players return to the stage at the end of a performance. The suggestion is that the actors have been effectively called back to take a final bow even if we are witnessing is in fact a party at the home of one of the protagonists. In using the term curtain call, we are reminded of the sequence that led us from the description in the prologue of a preliminary performance in Canberra at which player after player broke down and wept, fearing they
may not be able to take the final step onstage in Federal Parliament to the performance there and subsequent meetings with politicians culminating in an exchange between newly appointed Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone and a small group of asylum seekers and others.

In a further attempt to strengthen the tension between the prologue, I sought to refine the match between complication and resolution. Franklin notes (1994, p.80) the importance of checking “complication-resolution pairs” and cautions against “near misses”. When we read the prologue we have no way of knowing yet why the players broke down. What is significant was that they were so distressed they did not know if they could go on to perform in Federal Parliament the following evening. We are told in the prologue that they are to perform there in a desperate act to save themselves from being sent back to the places they have fled. We may wonder if this could possibly save them. But we know that this is their intent. We know from Franklin (1994, p77) that a resolution, “by definition, destroys tension”. In an earlier draft, I had made the mistake of assuming that this complication was resolved simply by the courageous act of getting onstage the next evening in Parliament House. Curtain-up would then be the moment of resolution. Superficially that may be so. Franklin notes too (p.74) that most complications involve both internal and external forces. I take internal to mean a more subtle, psychological resolution.

Few people attended the Parliament House performance – just one politician we know of and that person, Carmen Lawrence, was already sympathetic to the players’ plight. The tension was not destroyed there. Getting up onstage and performing for an audience in that particular venue regardless of the size may have been brave in itself but left you no closer to easing the underlying tension that comes from the disconnect between desperate refugees and the people in authority who decide their fate. This only occurred at a subsequent encounter with Amanda Vanstone at which at least one of the asylum seekers in the room, Arif, two of whose children had died after he fled Afghanistan, vividly recalled her reassurance to a distressed Hazara girl about to be sent back with her family and, even more significantly than words expressed by the politician, the act of touching the youngster’s hair. The gesture, as Arif described it, resolved tension created throughout by the deliberate efforts by government to marginalise asylum seekers, keeping them from the access they need to language classes to communicate their plight, undermining media. Vanstone later
told me that she could not remember the encounter. But this does not diminish the significance of this moment. The Minister is marginal, appearing briefly towards the end of the narrative. But Arif is among the central characters. With the notable exceptions, we are told that few politicians had any real contact with the people who had come to Australia by boat to seek refuge here. The teenager, Sarah Noori, declined through an intermediary to be interviewed for this project. The Minister could not remember. But we experience in Arif’s account of her words and deed – a gesture in the last paragraphs of the book in which he describes her reaching out to console the young Hazara and touching her hair – a physical contact between politician and asylum seeker of a kind we don’t expect, even if Lawrence has told us of her encounter in Chapter Thirteen with a man who had been held at Port Hedland. I was taken aback when he described this. It challenged my preconception. The reader may experience at the end of the book a glimmer of humanity. Arif is representative of a group; so too Vanstone. In this action (word and deed) these two groups meet. We know by then that Arif’s struggles did not end there. They would not for a few years. But this man, so distressed he had to be led from another politician’s office, is here reassured. The reader is hopefully able to experience the possibility of empathy.

Kind words and a touch of the hair do not mean a happy ending. As I worked on the artefact, I realised that this is a simplistic notion at best. With the worsening situation for people seeking asylum in Australia, there was no place for false optimism in such a narrative. Franklin writes (p.81) of showing the reader “some insightful choices that have positive results”. I was particular impressed by the ending of ‘Mrs Kelly’s Monster’, one of two stories he cites in his book as examples, among other things, of “stories about how people successfully coped with the world, endure, and even sometimes win”. Franklin made the protagonist a surgeon, Dr Ducker, who operated to remove a brain tumour, the monster in the title, from a long-suffering Mrs Kelly, in the hope of saving her life. The operation is unsuccessful. Mrs Kelly dies on the operating table. But she is not the protagonist. This is not a story about failure. Franklin (p.82) finds resolution in the surgeon’s insight. “Dr Ducker made Mrs Kelly’s complication his own of course, but when she died under his knife he didn’t fade into oblivion with her. He had to go on, to continue, to live – to do another operation, to help someone he could help. With dogged endurance, he accepted his failure but refused to hate himself for it. That is a lesson that the world sorely needs to learn...”
Had the story ended with Mrs Kelly, smiling in bed after the operation, thanking Dr Ducker, we would have had a happy ending but less satisfactory resolution.

If only to increase the chances of appealing to a broader audience, it was tempting initially to seek out some way in which I could portray the resolution in *Knock at the Door* as a happy ending. I was reminded by Franklin’s account of the ending of the above story that you did not need to be upbeat. There is, of course, an early resolution of sorts in the opening of the door at Fitzroy Learning Network. If the book was a short story, I might have structured it around the search for a door that opens to language classes and a new life. But there is no way I can see that I might have sustained this in a long form narrative. Had the photographer/publicist Lara McKinley been a central character, I might have ended with the moment on her wedding day in country Victoria that she receives a newspaper report outlining possible changes to asylum seeker policy and is reassured that she has contributed to change. Anne Horrigan-Dixon was certainly convinced that the activism helped change attitudes of politicians, as was strategist Mark Madden. Arif believes the exchange with Amanda Vanstone in her office signals a change in policy. I might have ended with an upbeat note. But subsequent events have made it clear that for asylum seekers, the harsh politics and public apathy persist and that those seeking to settle here are in many ways in a worse predicament than the players in *A Knock at the Door*. I conclude the book with a resolution that is at best ambiguous. Regardless of whether Vanstone touched the hair (and showed a glimmer of humanity) or spoke words of reassurance that particular Hazara teenager and her family was likely to be allowed to remain, Majid Shokor has reminded us that the players return to Melbourne uncertain about their future. In an earlier draft, I ended with Michael’s insistence on the goodwill he had found in the Australian community. This seemed inspiring after what he had endured and continued to endure. But it was important to resolve tension, if possible, without succumbing to an easy optimism that is inevitably shown up as false by subsequent events.

**The narrative style**

When rewriting the book, I looked at ways in which I could rework the anecdotes in extended quotes by the players to create scenes. For example, Chapter Three now begins:
It was way, way past midnight. Carmel Davies persuaded a friend to come along. They stood silently in the harsh light as the lift carries them up, up to the 13th floor. Arif opened his door to them. He led them into the sparsely furnished commission flat where they saw sleeping pills and tablets for ulcers on a table. He curled up in the corner of a brown couch and hugged his knees. His daughters were dead. Carmel and her friend sat quietly with him. They sat with him for hours. What could they say to console him? He had no family here, no one to mourn with, no one to share precious memories of two little girls, no one to hold as he cried in his sleep. No-one.

“Mohammed, go back, go back and see your wife ...”

In the previous draft I wrote:

Carmel Davies wrote a short note after she went to see Arif who called to say that he had received news that his two daughters had died. “We arrive at the Housing Commission flats in Napier Street Fitzroy after midnight. The lights (are on) in the empty lift. We are silent as the lift climbs to the 15th floor. Mohammed opens the door. His face is pale. We sit in the empty lounge. He curls up in the corner of the brown couch from St Vincent de Paul, hugging his knees. We stay for two hours, saying little. He has no family here, no one to mourn with, no one to share precious memories of two little girls, no one to hold as he cries in his sleep. We say, Mohammed, go back, go back and see your wife; you must see her. I’m on a temporary visa (he explains). I can’t leave this country. Under no circumstances can I leave this country. If I do I can never come back. All I can do (is) stay and work, send them money. I support seven people in Pakistan, five in Afghanistan. My wife says, don’t think of the past. Your heart will be broken. Think of our future. One day we will be together....I see no future...I am in a prison, a terrible prison. Your country is so large but for me it is a sad prison’. On a table in the corner I see sleeping tablets ... (and) a bottle of (pills) for stomach ulcers.”

“Scene-setting takes its power from its ability to put us into a story, to let us ride the narrative arc ourselves,” Jack Hart writes (2011, p.91). “We filter the details the writer provides through our own experiences, which is why great storytelling can coax such
strong emotions out of us.” In writing this book I have inevitably had to face the limitations of my own writing. It occurred to me that the ongoing challenge to rewrite to better engage with readers offered me a chance to come to grips with aspects of non-fiction writing which I had admired for decades but somehow not yet mastered. As a young reporter, I longed to be a feature writer. Fairly early in my career, I was able to spend a year writing features mostly for Fairfax’s Good Weekend magazine. But though I was a fairly engaging colour writer – better than a hard news reporter – this opportunity came to me too early. And though I was a feature writer for close to a decade at The Sunday Age, I still had not come to grips with the challenge to write scenes. So when I wrote this book, I thought of what I later came to regard as scenes as a series of vignettes. Each chapter then, though following a loose chronology to Canberra and beyond, was composed of a series of small stories. I had set out to create a tension between complication in the prologue and secondary complication in the first chapter with the decision to take the production to Canberra, dismissed as impossible initially, and final resolution in performing and meeting politicians they are. But I worried that the individual stories within each chapter slowed the pace. It occurred to me as I revisited the work as scenes and sought to write more vividly with dialogue written as direct quotes where possible that I was effectively freeing the narrative from the constraints I had set on earlier drafts and hopefully by shortening and sharpening and making more vivid have increased the tension and the likelihood that the reader who comes to this book with some interest or curiosity at the outset will remain engaged to the last, an unlikely gesture by the powerful, kind words and a touch of the hair to reassure the powerless.

Subsequent events and the decision to focus on events that occurred more than a decade ago

I note near the end of Chapter One: “As I write this, more than a decade after the asylum seekers and supporters took their show to Canberra, some who might now tell us their stories can’t even set foot on Australian soil. Some readers might wonder at the telling of a time when it seemed at least there was a chance of settling in Australia – less forbidding than in the years since the Gillard government re-introduced offshore processing in 2012
and Kevin Rudd, soon after being returned as Prime Minister by a struggling Labor government the following year, announced that no-one arriving by boat would gain asylum here.”

It was important to include in the first chapter, ESL teacher Carmel Davies’ reflection at the time of the 2014 production on the endearing need to use theatre to “keep telling people this is what is happening so people don’t turn their backs and forget”. The players were rehearsing the show in a week in June 2014 when news broke that a Tamil man on a bridging visa died after dowsing himself in petrol and setting himself on fire in Geelong, following a similar incident in Sydney months earlier. “As ordinary Australians what can we do?” Davies says. “It’s very hard to do anything. All we can do is keep telling people this is what is happening so people don’t turn their backs and forget.”

I quote her after citing an April 2017 article written by Kurdish journalist Behrouz Boochani on Manus Island who comments on a policy of offshore detention “fundamentally established on the basis of lies and concealment”. I note that Kurdish journalist and activist held on Manus Island wrote an article published in The Huffington Post on April 27 2017 that Australia’s policy of offshore detention was “fundamentally established on the basis of lies and concealment”. The article appeared days after Immigration Minister Peter Dutton had defended his claims on ABC TV’s Insiders program that Papua New Guinea soldiers fired bullets into the centre after asylum seekers had led a local boy into the detention centre. This was despite the insistence by the island’s police commander that the incident was not related to concern the safety of the boy.

Boochani wrote of “the government’s fiction” that seeking asylum was illegal. Australians tolerated the abuses on Manus and Nauru islands “by thinking wrongly that we are the ones who have committed a crime”. “After each devastating event during the past four years, like the deaths of fellow refugees, the Immigration Minister or spokesperson has never considered our side of the story. They have felt safe in the knowledge that this system is built on concealment and deceit. Journalists are denied access to the centre and most staff still risk prison sentences if they speak out. We on this remote island do not have enough power to defend ourselves against the Australian government’s misinformation because most of the media listen to what the officials say, and not to the refugees who have been
forced both out of sight and, seemingly, outside of any legal system where we could seek redress.”

I note Dutton’s announcement of an October 1 deadline for 7500 asylum seeker to lodge protection applications. I conclude Chapter One by insisting on the contemporary relevance of the story of an unlikely adventure in November 2003, when time was almost up on three-year visas and forced return seemed all the more likely after the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

I write that it is tempting to forget a time when people who came by boat seeking safety at last were instead detained indefinitely in remote camps. A time when some tried to hang themselves; some starved themselves in protest; some even sewed their lips together using needles and threads intended for mending clothes. A time when you remained marginalised even after release into the Australian community, were marginalised, denied basic access to language, uncertain if you would be sent back to danger or ever see your family again.

I tell readers that A Knock at the Door is in part a story of what they endured. But it is not just that. “Above all, it is about the challenge to welcome the stranger - a challenge we are denied when those who might be permitted to come among us are instead held on Pacific islands or otherwise kept from us. In part, this is the story of what happens when we are given a chance to get to know each other told at a time when the failure to do so denies us the chance to welcome the strangers. It is written with a conviction that the refusal to admit them is our loss too. This is not just a book about asylum seekers, activists, politicians and others. It’s about people. It’s about us.”

Balancing action and digression

One of the first challenges in reducing the length of the book was to identify unnecessary digression. Blundell cautions (p.119): “Digress often, but don’t digress for long”. He defines a digression as “any story element that doesn’t have salient action in it”. I sought to remove or at least reduce any element that did not inform the main narrative and in effect slowed the flow.

Some examples of material removed from the earlier draft of A Knock at the Door include a note on the role of an interpreter in an interview with Senegalese singer, Youssou N’Dour,
details from encounters/interviews with some of the participants, notably Alice Garner and Heather Stock as well as the omission of scenes and characters, notably the artist Aloma Treister, in which much, if not all, of the material is drawn from a 2006 newspaper interview I conducted and, reluctantly, a 2010 interview for this book with Polish-born Holocaust survivor, Halinka Rubin, who collaborated with two of the men on Nauru and cared for one of the men in Melbourne after his release. I excluded the latter, reluctantly as I say, because though associated with Fitzroy Learning Network, she had no direct involvement in the play.

Maintaining the focus on the story of the theatrical production

Perhaps the biggest challenge was to address what has been referred to as “a Russian novel problem”—the number of people quoted in the artefact. As I reworked the narrative initially, I deleted characters who were not integral to the theatre performance. Some have lost their place in the narrative even if the description of our meetings were particularly vivid. I removed the names of minor characters in the play, describing each instead by telling where they had come from, how they fled, their experience of detention etc so that the reader did not feel confused about their identities or pressured to try to remember who they might be or whether they had been mentioned earlier. I later reinstated some of the more significant characters omitted, notably Ahmad Raza, because I believe his account deepens our understanding of what he and fellow Hazaras, and others, endured.

In the end the names listed in the Dramatis Personae created to assist readers at the start of the book remains almost as lengthy as at the outset. This may be a failing. But I can’t see my way around it. I realise that other books focus on fewer characters and tried for some time to make one character – Michael at one stage – central, this is a book about a large group of people and I have selected stories integral to the narrative. If this was fiction, I would certainly consider creating composite characters to simplify the narrative. But though I cut back mention of some such as American Fulbright scholar Anne Heintz and was tempted to remove any mention of the farmer Ian Skiller, whom I did not interview, and delete observations by politicians I did, Bob Brown, Robert Wynne and Carmen Lawrence, I decided that each contributed to a narrative in which each helped give a deeper sense of the times without undermining the central focus on the players and performance.
Similarly, while I cut close to a third of the artefact, I retained a description of Erwin Kisch, the Prague-born socialist who broke a leg after jumping from a ship at Station Pier in 1934 and spoke several European languages but refused to co-operate when police in Sydney conducted a dictation test, then used under the Immigration Act, in Scottish Gaelic. And though tempted to cut them, I kept mention of some heroic people who put themselves at risk to save others during the Holocaust. Though their stories are well-chronicled elsewhere, I kept detailed the detailed account from the interview with barrister Julian Burnside and his artist wife Kate Durham because their stories are integral and they contributed significantly not only to activism at the time but, particularly in Burnside’s case, to *Kan Yama Kan*.

Franklin writes (p. 71) that a story requires “a sympathetic character (who) encounters a complicating situation that he confronts and solves”. The challenge in reviewing the earlier draft was to make sure that the primary characters are “sympathetic” in the sense that we care about them and their plight. I consolidated material on so that we know enough about them early in the narrative to want to know how they fare as it progresses. This was particularly so with Michael who still figures prominently throughout but whose story is less dispersed. I told more about him sooner, and added material I had omitted from earlier, notably his exchanging cigarettes (and money) for words in English with neighbours at a housing commission flat in Hoddle Street, Collingwood, before he discovered there were classes available to him at Fitzroy Learning Network. I brought forward a description of Carmel Davies’ visit to Woomera with her son and his friend to show the lengths to which she would go to get the story (play) right. I consolidated material on Mohammad al-Janabi and Mohammed Arif, who lost two of his children after fleeing Afghanistan, to strengthen the readers’ identification with him and his plight.

**Exploring the asylum-seeker issue in context**

In the book I have sought to show that the asylum seeker issue is by no means a phenomenon of a particular time. By citing the example of 1800s xenophobia towards early Chinese migrants, we get some sense of the historic context that inform contemporary attitudes in some quarters to asylum seekers denied any chance of settling in Australia in recent years and detained on Manus Island and Nauru. Similarly, the example of the experiences with language of Egon Kish in the 1930s is echoed in Prime
Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s insistence on language tests in his announcement of tougher citizenship requirements or the fact that the lengthy document to be completed by asylum seekers in Australia by October 1 2017 is in English. In reviewing the draft, I drew on a lengthy chronology in a parliamentary briefing on refugees and asylum seekers that included media statements by then immigration Minister Philip Ruddock (York, Barry, 2003) through the narrative to remind readers of the adversity faced by the group of asylum seekers who sought to gain permission to stay in Australia by making politicians and public aware of a common humanity, shared hopes and fears. I drew attention to parallels to the situation of the plight of the characters in the book to desperate asylum seekers in late May 2017 after Immigration Minister Peter Dutton dismissed many as “fake refugees” when announcing they would be deported if they failed to meet an October deadline to formally apply for protection visas. This action recalls the desperation of players in Kan Yama Kan at a time when the first temporary protection visas had already expired and others were due to expire and government sought to demonise them, for instance, as people who might be willing to throw their children overboard or resort to selling their own lips together in protest.

It was media reportage of the latter action that led journalist Peter Mares to look carefully at media coverage in the early 2000s. Mares found dismissive coverage in which protest organisers at Curtin detention centre were described as “ringleaders”, lip-sewing was described as “bizarre” and “grizzly”, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock said he would not be “intimidated” by such behaviour and most reports relied heavily on information from the Immigration Department in Canberra. “The media’s shallow treatment of the event shows how effectively the federal government had enforced a black-out on news from Australia’s six immigration detention centres,” Mares wrote (2002, p.15) It was not until late in 2000, after allegations of child sexual abuse at Woomera detention centre, conditions in Australia’s immigration detention facilities became a focus of national concern. “Since that time many journalists have devoted a great deal of effort investigating the issue and growing numbers of people employed in the detention centres have also decided to speak publicly about their concerns, despite the secrecy provisions included in their contracts,” Mares, then an ABC journalist, writes (p.15) As noted elsewhere in this exegesis, Mares noted in the preface to his 2002 edition of his book, first released the previous year, a change in some media coverage. “Many journalists are now working tenaciously to ferret out hidden facts and document personal stories,” he wrote (p.x11) Here a working journalist, ready to criticise his peers where criticism was due but alert to media practice and ready also to acknowledge changes in coverage, did so years ahead of others, notably
Julian Burnside for whom relatively few journalists paid attention to asylum seekers until news broke that Australian permanent resident, German citizen Cornelia Rau was unlawfully detained for 10 months in 2004 and 2005 was there “a change in thinking”. “Then you couldn’t open a newspaper without seeing refugee stories,” Burnside said.

**Description and detail in the narrative**

There are objects in this narrative that remind us of difference – a brass coffee set from Sarajevo; an ornate rug from Kurdistan; a bird cage from Shanghai to remind refugees of home in *Without my Mother’s Hand* in Chapter Two. In *Kan Yama Kan*, we have a female player behind opaque paper in a pressed metal frame. But mostly, the objects are familiar and mundane – a blue sedan, a silver station wagon, an upturned plastic tub with a roof title on top used as mailbox.

While I have deleted some of the more mundane detail – in particular details from my meetings with some of the people featured in the book and, as one reader noted, the inevitable cup of coffee – I believe that details on clothes, cars, food et cetera remind readers that people seeking to live among us are on not unlike them. I was reminded of the importance of this after Gunditjmara filmmaker and musician Richard Frankland, about whom I have written several stories over the years, remarked to my son on the fact that one in particular, about the founding of a pro-indigenous political party, Your Voice, began with a description of a meal. “This is the way a political party is born,” I began in the feature that appeared in *The Age* on July 28 2004. “Just 10 people sit around a table on a chilly night in suburban Thornbury enjoying good food - roast lamb with potatoes, peas, beans and carrots dripping in gravy.

A 25-page document, alongside the crockery, cutlery and wine glasses, outlines the constitution of the fledgling pro-indigenous party, Your Voice. "This is not about winning or losing tomorrow," says the man who arrived last. "This is about forever. This is planting a seed." Soon they will repair to an adjoining room to consider such matters as dispute resolution, pre-selection, responsibilities of office bearers and finances. But first the foot soldiers must eat...”
Intentionally or not, the focus on food strengthened the ability of the non-indigenous reader to identify with people described in the feature story with whom they might otherwise have felt some distance.

In Chapter Five of *A Knock at the Door*, I recall how before each performance, dramaturg Robin Laurie had the players offer audiences tea and sweet pastry filled with chopped nuts and dates. “First we attend to the stomach, and then to the soul,” Majid Shokor would say in his welcome. “Now we can talk. Open our hearts. Look each other in the eye. And tell tales.” I cite Laurie’s explanation: “The thing that is really important is the notion of hospitality. Most other cultures will take in the stranger. A stranger knocks on the door (and) you have an obligation to offer them hospitality for the night. And that really struck me because that's not something we do ... So at the beginning of the performance that was the thing about people welcoming the audience, offering the tea and dates and something to eat and having a chat. Partly also that's to try to make the gap between the audience and the performers porous: to break down that gap. Everyone is a part of the same event. The audience is as much a part of it as the performers.”

I describe the food on offer on other occasions including the picnic at Raymond Island and parties at Fitzroy Learning Network and Arif’s home. In cutting back to focus on the story of the play, I removed mention of a (halal) meal I enjoyed at the network and act of hospitality with two Afghan asylum seekers in Footscray, one of whom remade a meal after learning that I did not eat meat. I kept the description of food and hospitality enjoyed when I met Ahmad Raza at his home.

In the first paragraph of *Mrs Kelly’s Monster*, Franklin tells us that Dr Ducker’s wife serves him waffles for breakfast but no coffee (because that would make his hands shake) and as he leaves for work in the sixth paragraph hands him a paper bag in which she has put a peanut butter sandwich, banana and two fig newtons (1986 edition, pp. 28-29). In the second last paragraph, before noting, that the monster won, Dr Ducker “bites, grimly, into the sandwich” (1986, p.39). The food shows us, without telling, that life goes on.
I kept detail on the cars driven in most cases because they tell of a freedom to move about the countryside we might take for granted. But I note that Arif’s was “prized” because it is emblematic somehow of a freedom (and prestige perhaps) he cannot otherwise enjoy at this stage.

I deleted detail of clothes worn onstage such as the red top beneath a dark grey suit by Alice Garner. I could describe clothes and gestures not from memory or notes taken at the time but because I had access to an audiovisual footage of the production. Tom Wolfe has written (Wolfe and Johnson 1975, p.35) that several of the writers he famously termed New Journalists stayed with people they were writing about “for days at a time, weeks in some cases”. This enabled them to witness dramatic scenes and dialogue. I faced a particular challenge. I was a general reporter with a focus on migrant and refugee issues but who covered much else. I saw the show once in Melbourne but did not make it to Canberra to witness the performance. I reported on Fitzroy Learning Network and Kan Yama Kan intermittently. I kept notes from interviews for this book. However, if I placed too much emphasis on details from encounters when I sought out players and others years later for this book, the detail could be a distraction that slowed the narrative, undermining tension by reminding us that they were now permanent residents.

I was grateful to be given access to audiovisual material including filmed footage of the opening night at the Victorian Trades Hall building and type transcripts of performances in the Speigeltent in Melbourne and in Canberra. Though I interviewed players and others at rehearsal and attended opening night in July 2002, as noted above I did not see subsequent performances and so was not able to observe the production as I might have had I set out to write a book length narrative and accompanied the performers and others through Melbourne, country Victoria and, in particular, to Canberra. So I did not have the opportunity to note down the kind of detail that might perhaps otherwise have made this richer account. Though I was delighted to find a typed account by American Fulbright scholar Anne Heinz Andrew on its detail heavily in a preliminary draft, I later cut away much of this, uneasy for some reason with the tone. More valuable it seemed to me was the film
footage of the opening night which gave me a sense of the characters, their appearances, expressions, gestures and dress.

Authorial presence in the artefact

It was tempting to remove myself from the narrative. It was after all primarily their story – the asylum seekers and their support – not mine. As journalists, we are trained to seek to ensure that we do not intrude with personal opinion or anecdote or observation. This is particularly the case in covering news. However, you can minimise references to yourself but cannot remove yourself without the risk of undermining the integrity of the project as auto-ethnography, a qualitative research method which analyses the personal “to understand the cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011). Once I settled on this method, I had to walk the line between maintaining a presence without getting in the way of the story.

I sought to somehow be strategic in asserting my place in the story as observer and narrator without seeking to intrude. It was not my place to steal the narrative. But I did need to assert my place in the text if only to make it clear why it was warranted. I brought forward in the narrative a confession that I had little interest in theatre generally and the notion that my interest revolved around the realisation that there were parallels between what the play was doing and I was seeking to do as a journalist – the page was my stage. At the start of Chapter Four, I told of my first interview with an Iraqi asylum seeker who expressed his misgivings that he was able to express some little of what he and others experienced in detention at Port Hedland and mentioned the release at that time of the book I’d written set in apartheid-era South Africa to establish what motivated me in my approach to covering the issue. In this way and in my description of encounters with Michael and Mohammad I made my presence felt. Thereafter I tended to minimise my own presence until midway through the book, at the start of Chapter Seven, where I explored my perception of myself as a “bleeding heart” and the way in which my approach to reporting may or may not have been influenced by my first assignment as a rookie reporter, a “death knock”, as it is termed in the industry. On the first morning of a paid internship with an afternoon newspaper in South Africa, I was sent to interview the family of an 11-year-old “coloured” (mixed race) girl who had drowned the previous day, the first
of summer holidays. In showing how the family welcomed my visit, with another rookie, I sought to illustrate the influences on my coverage of people who were considered to be marginal to the mainstream and whose interests and concerns might otherwise tend to be overlooked. I had not featured this in earlier drafts but decided that it helped explain my approach to journalism.

I reworked material which had appeared early in previous drafts and shifted it to the penultimate, Chapter Thirteen, to show the impact of theatre to one who raised as I was in a country where, among other absurdities, apartheid-era authorities permitted “blacks” to see Cinderella with a white cast but not Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. In this way I use theatrical performance to remind readers of the particular perspective of a narrator raised in in an infamously segregated society.

Matthew Ricketson (2014, p.139) writes that only occasionally does John Hersey comment on the horror he encounters in Hiroshima, in which he tells the story of the 6 August 1945 US bombing of the Japanese city through the accounts of six survivors. “The absence of open signals to the reader about the article’s reportorial underpinnings, combined with Hersey’s conscious decision to, as far as possible, remove himself from the narrative, undoubtedly increases the likelihood of it being read as ‘antiseptic’, but a fuller understanding of the context in which Hersey wrote shows he was anything but uncaring and that sometimes in prose less effect can make a more powerful impact.”

I had a sense in including my perspective, even if only in asking some asylum seekers if a migrant such as I could understand what they endured, if I was not intruding in the story. I knew I had to be there in some way, observing as a journalist who covered the issue at the time as well as a migrant from a particular place where theatre was one way of cutting through, however limited the extent, when news media failed to communicate stories of marginalised people.

There are writers who assert flamboyant presences in their work – notably Tom Wolfe and Hunter S. Thompson. But there are others more muted. Jack Hart has written (Hart 2011, p.63) with admiration of the approach of the American non-fiction writer, John McPhee. “On the page, McPhee’s voice is as modest as the man himself. Each sentence performs
honest labour, contributing to the calm, orderly progression of the narrative.” To Hart, McPhee is “a man in control, and you feel secure when he guides you into some wilderness or backwater. He is the Gary Cooper you’d want guiding your wagon train.” I’m not sure about the iconic American film star but from the relatively little I have read of McPhee’s work the modesty and control Hart identifies are admirable qualities to which I would like to think I might yet aspire.

**From daily journalism to book-length journalism**

I have explained earlier in this chapter how that as journalists, we are trained to seek to ensure that we do not intrude with personal opinion or anecdote or observation. This is particularly the case in covering news. I explain that in a one-year stint with Good Weekend magazine in the mid-1980s and almost a decade as feature writer for The Sunday Age and despite having a published memoir, I still had much to learn about writing narrative-nonfiction of a kind necessary to maintain interest in a book-length narrative.

I revisited the work as scenes and sought to write more vividly dialogue as direct quotes where possible, efforts to ensure a match between complication and resolution and a device to note the amount of time until “curtain-up” in Parliament House, effectively freeing the narrative from the constraints I had set on earlier drafts, shortening and sharpening the artefact and increasing the tension. I began writing *A Knock at the Door* some months after leaving The Age. A publisher who had heard of my coverage of asylum seekers approached me to write a book about activists for asylum seekers during the early 2000s. I agreed to write it if the story of the opening of the door at Fitzroy Learning Network and the play that went to Canberra was central. While researching the book, a former colleague at Swinburne University suggested that I write the book as part of the PhD by artefact and exegesis. At the time, I suspected strongly that journalism had failed and that we had not conveyed as fully as we might have the plight of detainees and temporary protection visa holders. I had not yet read the literature when I came to this conclusion. I might have been wrong. My impression might simply have been based on personal frustration at being unable to follow through with the early work I had done in covering the issue. It might simply have been that my expectation that we set aside reportage that seemed less urgent to me and devote much more time and space to covering asylum seekers was unrealistic. So I was heartened to find that study after study highlighted the media for its failure in various ways. For a while I felt vindicated. But as I read the academic papers, I became aware of an absence of the
perspective of practitioners (journalists). Though this was a flaw, I had no reason to believe
the studies were essentially incorrect. It occurred to me that the theatre production about
which I was writing could be seen as counter narrative at a time when media was
compromised by factors including government spin. Later, I realised that in a sense the book
I was writing was in itself counter narrative if it succeeded in conveying the personal stories
that were sometimes overlooked in news reportage. It was important if this was the case to
write in such a way that I was not just preaching to the converted, that there was a narrative
that appealed even to those who did not share my views on the need to welcome these
strangers.

Mathew Ricketson interviewed David Marr about *Dark Victory*, the award-winning and
critically acclaimed 2003 book co-written with Marian Wilkinson Marr about the Tampa,
issues and its events were well known at the time, but it reads like a novel, which is
reflected in the dust jacket copy’s description of the book as ‘a thrilling and provocative
account of events’,” Ricketson writes (2014, p.141). He cites comment by critics who wrote
among other things that it “reads like the scariest, most horrifying thriller”, was “a gripping,
ripping yarn” and “a ‘breathtaking read’. Marr had welcomed this comment. The book
needed to be written like a thriller if it were to have any chance of engaging a broad
audience, “and in this he and Wilkinson succeeded, selling more than 35,000 copies over
two editions” (p.141). “Marr was not wanting to reach a broader audience for the sake of it,
or for commercial success, but because he believed the issues were important and that they
should be discussed with a deeper understanding of the meaning of events that had taken
place amid the clamour of competing voices in the election and against the backdrop of the
11 September 2001 terrorist attacks.” (pp. 141-2)

Marr and Wilkinson did not just reach out to a broad audience. They provided material to
enable readers to test the integrity of their research and come to their own conclusions.
“There seems little doubt that the book’s page-turning narrative played a major role in its
success,” Ricketson writes of *Dark Victory* (p. 142). “Equally important, if less remarked on,
is the means given to readers to assess the work’s veracity and, if they choose, question the
authors’ interpretations.” Ricketson writes that the authors provided readers with the
means to scrutinise their sources and methods in 28 pages of endnotes providing sources of
documents, papers and interviews. He notes that all but seven interviewees were identified and that they provided six pages of acknowledgements explaining how they obtained their information and thanking those who had spoken to them off the record. He concludes that *Dark Victory* “played a key role in articulating and cementing in readers a belief that Howard had drawn on long-standing and deep-seated fears in Australians about border security to take electoral advantage of the arriving asylum seekers” (p. 142). They did so as journalists in a work of book-length journalism that did more to inform the public surely than might have been the case had they undertaken the project as an academic monograph.

Peter Mares’ *Borderline*, first published in 2001, was released by UNSW Press in its Reportage series. In his foreword to the second edition the following year, Neville J Roach cited its author’s comment in his preface to the first edition in which he wrote that he had “unashamedly adopted a journalistic style in writing this book, with the aim of making it as engaging and readable as possible”. “The new addition retains that style, making his work, for all the scholarship and rigour, enjoyable and interesting, even for readers who would not normally care to pick up a book on such a ‘serious’ subject,” Roach wrote (Mares 2002, p.viii). Here again, we have a journalist engaging with and informing a larger audience than he might have done had this been an academic monograph only. The fact that these award-winning books in which respected journalists were openly critical of much of the coverage by their peers were works of journalism – book-length or not – is worth noting when considering the overall performance of journalists in their coverage of asylum seekers in the early 2000s.

The contemporary significance of an artefact written in the hope of reaching a broad audience

*A Knock at the Door* was conceived as a book in which I would be able to celebrate in particular the integrity of those who stood up for asylum seekers in the early 2000s at a time when they were being vilified and regarded by some as “queue jumpers”. Initially, I was particularly interested in the opening of a door – the welcome of strangers. I questioned how I might have conducted myself had I been similarly challenged. I did so in as
a migrant from South Africa who had grown up in the apartheid era and had spent several years writing a memoir of sorts, *The Wild Almond Line*, in which I explored the notion of complicity of each of us to privilege – and in particular those of us conscripted into the military – at a time of enforced segregation. *A Knock at the Door* was not conceived initially as an academic monograph. Only after a senior journalism academic made me aware in the early stages of research of the possibility of continuing to work on it as part of a PhD by artefact and exegesis did I proceed along these lines. I have no illusions about this book. I do not believe that it will reach a broad audience. But I’m certainly not preaching to the converted and hope that it will be widely read even if the sales or readership is fairly modest. To write it exclusively for an academic readership would limit its chances of reaching a broader audience I have set out to interest. I have sought to tell a story that is emblematic of the relationship between those of us fortunate enough to live in a relatively secure and affluent society and those who have come here, by boat or otherwise, to escape the risks they faced, the trauma they endured and in the hope of a stable future. I do not regard it as a book of historic interest only. Had the harsh treatment of asylum seekers been an aberration and Australia had moved on to a more benign approach, this book might have been of purely historic significance, if at all. But I was reminded again of parallels when Peter Dutton announced in late May 2017 that asylum seekers in Australia who had arrived by boat had just over four months to apply for refugee status or face deportation. As noted in the artefact, the CEO of the Melbourne-based Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, Kon Karapanagiotidis, issued a statement, saying 24,500 people, including 4395 children, were affected by the October 1 deadline and 7500 people were desperately trying to find legal support to lodge their protection applications. In his appeal for public support, Karapanagiotidis said no government had dared to do “something so unlawful and despicable” in the 62 years since Australia ratified the Refugee Convention. Those who failed to apply to meet “impossible deadlines” would lose their right to seek asylum, all welfare support and access to Medicare. They were denied a fair hearing and review because the government had cut legal funding by 90 per cent, forcing people to lodge applications requiring them to answer 116 questions on application forms only available in English without proper legal advice. Once again, command of the language was a potential barrier.
Dutton dismissed the men, women and children whose plight was easily overlooked or underestimated as “fake refugees”. They had made it onto Australian soil before asylum seekers were prevented from entering the country. But like the temporary protection visa holders of the early 2000s there was no guarantee they would remain. As the players in A Knock at the Door neared Canberra it seemed to some unlikely that they would be allowed to stay. And though they were mostly able to remain, the artefact tells a story that speaks to the uncertainty in our times and will continue to be relevant, distressingly so, until we find some way of accommodating people who come here lawfully seeking protection. And if this book is to make any kind of contribution to a change in attitude, however small that might be, it cannot do so if it is just an academic monograph. It must be addressed to a broad audience, even if the readership is relatively small. Nor can it preach to the converted. If it is to move anyone to empathy if not compassion – as I hope it does – it must be accessible to the general reader.

When I wrote newspaper reports about asylum seekers I didn’t know of the term “counter narrative”. But I did write knowing full well that I was placing a narrative I hoped would broaden and deepen understanding – by telling news stories rather than preaching or commenting – and that if they reached a fraction only of the tens of thousands I believed read the newspaper that day, each story was having some modest impact. At the start of Chapter Seven I recall looking back after I left The Age and asking myself what I had achieved as being a general news and feature writer. I decided that though I’d never had a specific beat or round, mine was the bleeding heart beat. I was amused at this. It seemed to me then that this could be construed as an admission of weakness. It certainly was no necessary virtue. At worst, it suggested a smug self-righteousness which could undermine professionalism. I had potentially lost sight perhaps of the need to remain dispassionate, had possibly allowed my journalism to be undermined by activism to such an extent that one of the editors once sent a news editor on the Sunday paper to caution me not to come to weekly conference with any more story ideas on the issue of asylum seekers. Enough, apparently, was enough. But as I told myself I had erred in the eyes of some colleagues, I was aware that others were writing compelling pieces on the issue. I remained convinced that on issues such as this it was right to persist.
I have since come to suspect that assumptions on our role as journalists might have held us back from effective reporting. There was no necessary folly in being a bleeding heart. It might just have been a way of adapting to meet the needs of a changing world. Objectivity is often identified as a key element of the professional self-perception of journalists, Dutch media academic Mark Deuze has written. “Although objectivity has a problematic status in current thinking about the impossibility of value-neutrality, academics and journalists alike revisit this value through synonymous concepts like ‘fairness’, ‘professional distance’, ‘detachment’ or ‘impartiality’ to define and (re-) legitimise what media practitioners do.” (Deuze M, p. 448)

Deuze writes that with globalisation, migration and the emergence of “dyasporic communities” (p.454) journalists were required to develop “multicultural sensibilities”. “A multicultural sensitivity challenges objectivity as it is commonly understood, and supposedly offers a way out of the binary paradigm of ‘getting both sides of the story’ in favour of more complex or multi perspectival readings of events.” (p.456)

This may be beyond the scope of this PhD, which is essentially a case study of a theatre activism at a time when academic research suggests media coverage was compromised. But it does seem to me that what is suggested is an evolving notion of journalism. I have noted elsewhere in this exegesis the way in which Arnold Zable has made a practice of allowing interviewees to read what he has written about them at the risk of their withdrawal. He has indicated to me that it has enriched his writing. As a journalist we tend to be wary of losing control. You may agree to allow an interviewee to read their specific quotes but often only on condition that they understand that you are not bound to change the material. I anxiously awaited the response from each of the interviewees in this book. Several made valuable corrections. At what cost do we change the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, from an assertion of control to a more trusting approach.

Zable writes occasional journalism but is not a conventional journalist and I do not mean to suggest that his approach illustrates Deuze’s assertions on the profession. But it reminded me of a recent talk to writing students at Swinburne University when he revealed an imaginative approach to non-fiction in telling the story of SIEVX survivor Amal Basry in his
2011 book, *Violin Lessons*. As a child in Baghdad her father would play her the songs of the Egyptian singer, Umm Khultum. Rather than rely on a transcript of interview, Zable had used the singer’s voice as inspiration and, in doing so, captured something of Basry he might otherwise not have in writing in what was ostensibly her voice. I’m sure you need a particular skill, talent and commitment to pull off something of this nature. I don’t know that I would dare. But I do think that we would benefit from a more empathetic approach to interviewing and less determined control of process in cases where you are not dealing with someone who is himself or herself intent on asserting undue control. You wouldn’t, for instance, give a politician a chance to assert his or her spin. You do not relinquish your role to hold power to account. But it is worth considering our role in relationship to the people who share their stories with us, all the more so when and if they are made more vulnerable in the telling.

Deuze writes (p.456): “Multimedia’s careful embrace of interactivity as well as a merging of different cultures (print, broadcast, online; ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news, marketing and editorial) within the news organisation – a perceived necessary byproduct of convergence – confronts the individual professional with multiple interpretations of objectivity. It is therefore not surprising that journalists’ main response to such changes and challenges is nostalgia (and stress). Yet at the same time reporters involved in the frontlines claim to have gained a new appreciation of different ways to do things, reaching out to different communities (and colleagues), enacting their agency in the process of change. In other words: an active awareness of (the potential added value of) new media technologies and cultural plurality makes the core value of objectivity more complex.”

I would like to think – and I may be wrong – that the approach I blithely dismissed as the “bleeding heart beat” was in fact a response reflected to some degree “a new appreciation of different ways to do things”.

In writing about not just asylum seekers but other refugees, Aborigines or others then who might be marginal to mainstream society, I hoped to exert some influence. This may be mere vanity. Some may say this tainted my journalism because I was not dispassionate or objective for neutral. But as I have indicated in drawing on the impact of my experience on
the first day as a journalism intern of a “death knock” in which I interviewed the family of an 11 year-old girl who drowned in the first hour of the holidays, I was intent from the outset on using storytelling in reportage for what I perceived to be social cohesion. This book was conceived with a similar intent. And if it only reaches a fraction of a fraction of the readership one of my newspaper reports might have, hopefully it will not be confined to an academic readership. Certainly, it is written in a way that should be accessible to both academic and non-academic readers.

Some limitations of the author’s perspective as a response to the lack of journalists’ voices in studies and media coverage

I had made a start on the book before I began researching media coverage. It did not occur to me initially that the book might in some way contribute to filling a gap in the knowledge. However, having found an absence in the academic studies of journalists’ perspectives, it took on another significance. The book would give some insights on the practice of a particular journalist. However, as discussed elsewhere in this exegesis, it concerned me that I was hardly representative. I had come to the profession to learn skills that might be useful to me as a writer. I did not plan to remain a journalist. Though I soon found my place and ultimately a sense of vocation, I would be the first to concede there are plenty of journalists who might have provided a more representative perspective. Also, my approach is informed by formative experience as a migrant from apartheid-era South Africa. The migrant experience might have made me particularly alert to the concerns of outsiders even if I did so as a comparatively privileged migrant, in terms of access to language and a culture not so unlike the one on which I was raised. Elsewhere in this exegesis I explained at length how my upbringing impacted on my approach to journalism. Here, let me say only that as I revisited my own coverage and re-interviewed asylum seekers and others mindful of the lack of journalists’ perspectives, I could not overlook the fact that mine is only a particular perspective and in some ways might have less in common with my peers than had I been born in this country and raised here. Had the method of artefact and exegesis allowed, I would certainly have interviewed other journalists who covered the issue at the time. This, however, would only have been
possible in a PhD by artefact and exegesis had they been integral to the narrative. It will certainly be worth following up this project by canvassing the issue with others for a subsequent study.
Chapter Three: Methodology

As I considered the book in the context of the PhD project, it seemed all the more appropriate, after encountering scholarly research that overwhelmingly questioned the role of the media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees in the early 2000s, to have included the perspective of a practitioner who covered the issue. Much of the research on media performance at the time appears to be text-based rather than interview-based. There is a lack of interviews with media practitioners even the few identified as having failed to do their job. However, I wondered at times if it was not presumptuous to focus on my own experience primarily in seeking to fill a gap in scholarly inquiry which has neglected the voices of Australian journalists. I don’t seek to suggest that I am somehow typical or representative. No journalist could make such a claim. Surely then my perspective was of limited value.

I considered interviewing other journalists early in the PhD journey, when I briefly abandoned the artefact and exegesis to compare media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees in two eras – the Vietnamese in the Fraser-era from the mid-1970s and Iraqis, Afghans, Iranians and others in the Howard-era from the late 1990s. But I returned to the original doctoral thesis informed by the Practice Led Research approach explained in this chapter in which a reflexive journal provides a bridge to help ensure the artefact and exegesis inform each other, to fill the gap in scholarly research. In telling the story of Kan Yama Kan, I sought to write in such a way that I provided insights on the influences and practices of a working journalist who covered the issue extensively during the latter period.

I remained uncertain about the value of such an approach until I found in autoethnography a method that confirms the validity of drawing on my own experiences in addressing the problem of the near absence of journalists' perspectives in academic research on media coverage of the issue. “At its core, autoethnography suggests autobiographical and life story wisdoms extended to a wider cultural understanding,” Ken Plummer explained in his introduction to a 2009 paper. Plummer (2009) writes that autoethnographers should write in the first person even if this breaks the rules of objective science writing and “his or her voice has to come out, be discussed and situated at the forefront of analysis”.

As noted in the introduction, Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) describe autoethnography as a research method which analyses the personal “to understand the cultural experience”.

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They write of narrative ethnographies which “refer to texts presented in the form of stories that incorporate the ethnographer's experiences into the ethnographic descriptions and analysis of others...” The method of autoethnography enables me to “use personal experience to illustrate facets of cultural experience, and, in so doing, make characteristics of a culture familiar for insiders and outsiders” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011).

This helps me understand my role as observer/narrator of the story of the theatre production, Kan Yama Kan. A Knock at the Door describes encounters between the narrator/ethnographer as journalist and asylum seekers and supporters. This study then is in part a belated attempt, using autoethnography, to provide an in-depth examination of that era by focussing on the participants and others in a particular newspaper story (The Sunday Age, July 14, 2002, page 3) and related reports I wrote at the time; and telling the story behind the story without the constraints of deadline or restrictions on space had I revisited it as a newspaper or magazine story. A non-fiction book allowed for the necessary time and space to explore the role of media, while focusing on a case study of one of more than 30 theatre projects staged in response to the government’s asylum seeker policies in Australia between 2002 and 2005.

I realised the value of autoethnography in permitting my research after attempts to provide a theoretical framework generated elsewhere to frame what I was doing. I unsuccessfully sought meta-theoretical frameworks such as could be provided by Karl Maton’s Legitimation Code Theory, which talks of “the rules of the game” and how they operate in particular fields.

My approach is somewhat different from the research in which there are specific methods whereby you look through your raw data for the recurring patterns which become the concepts you articulate when explaining how your research generated ideas or hypotheses.

I did not set out at the beginning of the research to gather data in order to find conceptual patterns. Instead I sought to inquire into the response by a group of theatre activists to negative media coverage of asylum seekers and relative lack of journalists’ perspectives in academic debates over the issue and, in the process of inquiry, become informed by the ideas of certain key texts by authors including Augusto Boal and Paulo Freire and concepts that highlighted the role between journalism and theatre activism including Boal’s Newspaper Theatre, described elsewhere in this exegesis, and Living Newspaper in which
current events were dramatised in the Soviet Union, Germany and the United States in the early 20th century.

Rather than a theoretical framework, I used a set of ideas or concepts by the above authors and others that are either directly cited, or inform, the book’s narrative. My study was informed by a method known as Practice Led Research in which the creative practice (in this case the writing) precedes and drives the research which, according to Josie Arnold offers several “opportunities” (Arnold 2007, p. 4) to the academy, including “enabling an understanding that research can follow practice rather than act in a different knowledge domain” (Arnold 2007, p. 5).

“Traditionally, practice has followed the research by being its object,” Arnold writes (p.3). “Practice Led Research (PLR), as the name implies, enables the academy to look at practice as a way of bringing forth the research both in itself and in an interaction with the ideas and debates that may be teased out from it. Thus the practice both underpins and interacts with the research. The practice is not only important as research in its own right, it also leads the research as a significant and new contribution to knowledge that can be situated fruitfully within current academic debates and insights.”

I was trying to create a text that investigated certain research questions about the media’s role and performance in reporting on asylum seekers at a time in the context of a theatre activism as counter-narrative to coverage. What I am describing here is in a sense a retrospective methodology because it helps explain what I was trying to do when writing the book. I didn’t set out to write an autoethnography. While reflecting on the writing of the book, I looked for methodologies that mirrored what I was trying to do. If one is looking for a type of research that captured what I have done, autoethnography would be it. I wasn’t doing it consciously. It was only in reflecting on the book and how I worked that I looked to see if there were any research methodologies that reflected what I was trying to do. Autoethnography seems to be the one that is closest.

This then isn’t a classical methodology chapter in a conventional thesis. In a conventional thesis the methodology chapter usually explains what you deliberately set out to do when you started your research. There you articulate a research question and ask what research methodology will enable you to answer the research question. Then you describe the methodology by relating it to existing paradigms. You show how having chosen this
methodology, you went about finding out what you wanted to know. This is not quite how I approached it.

When considering the artefact and exegesis approach, it is worth keeping in mind that artefact and exegesis was traditionally more common in the non-verbal media and later extended to writing projects. As much as a study engaged with a non-verbal creative work, this thesis explores ideas that inform the creative process. The conceptual context includes cultural background, values, beliefs, journalists/writers’ practice, historical and contemporary contexts of journalism and theatre, cultural contexts and theory.

Like the painter, sculpture, filmmaker, photographer or others engaged in a PhD by artefact and exegesis, the writer has a method of going about things that is not a research methodology. An artist/writer might examine how he or she went about doing the creative work, in my case a book not an exhibition of paintings or photographs. You wouldn’t expect a painter to explain how he or she went about painting in terms of methodology. They might instead talk about what methods were used. There is a difference between creative methods and research methodology. The way you do research in an academic context is different from the way in which a creative person does research.

Creative people do research. Novelists often research the fiction that they write but they don’t necessarily go about it in an academic way. Similarly, non-fiction writers working on books, as I have in the artefact, must almost inevitably do research their topics. This can involve textual study, structured and semi-structured interviews and even, in the case of books including Jack London’s *The People of the Abyss* or George Orwell’s *Down and Out in Paris and London* or *The Road to Wigan Pier*, a research framework known as Participant Observation used by anthropologists and others.

Neither London nor Orwell would have asked, what methodology am I using? The more likely question is: what do I need to know in order to produce this creative work? In Jack London’s case this might have included a gold sovereign sewed into the singlet he wore while living in poverty in London’s East End, just in case. London and Orwell are in a long line of writers who immersed themselves in unfamiliar settings to record their impressions. They have a method of going about doing that. “You must saturate your mind – by immersing yourself in the subject as deep as you can go,” Theodore A. Rees Cheney writes (Rees Cheney, TA, 1991 p.190). “The result: Your writing yields something beyond what might be
expected, whether that means information unexpected, or information expressed in a creative (unexpected) way.”

Methodology stands outside the method and says, how would I describe what I was doing from a theoretical or conceptual point of view and does it relates to something that any other academic has done? I chose certain methods explored in the exegesis to produce the book, *A Knock at the Door*, and have used the exegesis as an opportunity to reflect on those methods to see to what extent they do and do not align or coincide with academic methodologies.

Autoethnography seemed the most appropriate. “Given that culture is a web of self and others, autoethnography is not a study simply of self alone,” Heewon Chang writes on the use of autoethnography as a method. “Others personally or conceptually connected to self are often incorporated in autoethnography. Family members, friends, colleagues, and neighbours are others personally connected to self. Strangers can be connected to self through group membership or common experiences, if not through personal contacts.” (Chang, 2008, p. 65)

Chang (p. 65) describes three ways in which the self and others may be “positioned” in auto ethnography. “First, you can investigate yourself as a main character and others as supporting actors in your life story. Second, you can include others as co-participants or co-informants in your study. Third, you can study others as the primary focus, yet also as an entry to your world.”

In *A Knock at the Door*, I have at no time sought to investigate myself as the main character, as I certainly did in my book, *The Wild Almond Line*, in which I explored the personal impact of growing up in apartheid-era South Africa. To some extent I did regard some of the key characters in the artefact as “co-participants” or “co-informants”. I am indebted to them for their trust with in some cases accounts of experiences that continue to traumatised them. To a large extent too, I did regard the asylum seekers and activists in the narrative as the “primary focus”. But as a counter narrative to the prevailing media coverage, they provided an “entry” to my world as a journalist.
**My own subjectivity about the research**

The writing was instructive in that I learned about my own limitations and prejudices. In writing the book, for instance, I found that I had made certain assumptions about one of the leading characters, an Iraqi woman whose husband had agreed to her involvement in the production only after an assurance that she would remain hidden behind a specially-constructed screen. Later, as I describe it, she leaves the husband, removes her hijab headscarf, remarries and in effect distances herself from her own (Australian Iraqi) community as she integrates with the broader Australian community. I reworked the relevant chapters after an appropriate caution from one of my supervisors. Though I had thought I had maintained some balance by including comments by women I had previously interviewed who had converted to Islam and spoke of its benefits, I wrote of this particular woman’s experience in such a way that must have betrayed a somewhat naive assumption that what she had experienced was necessarily liberating and that therefore the experience of women who adhered to the faith was not.

“The ‘veil’ has become the new all-encompassing metaphor for Islam itself – a kind of shorthand for every negative perception about Islam from excessive virtue to endemic violence (Brasted 2009, p.74). “.... In a way that does not apply to other religions Islam has come to be charged by the status accorded to women in Muslim societies – particularly where that position is seen as low, unequal, and discriminatory.”

I reworked material, seeking to edit out any instances that might reinforce prejudices of some readers who might make the kind of assumption that I had. “Far from being naive pragmatic accounts of Islam, the images and processes by which the media has delivered Islam for consideration to the Western consumer of news perpetuate hostility and ignorance for reasons very well analysed by Noam Chomsky in a long series of books,” Edward W Said wrote. “...Sensationalism, crude xenophobia and insensitive belligerence are the order of the day, with results on both sides of the imaginary line between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that are extremely unedifying.” (Said 1997, p.xlviii)

While proceeding cautiously when reworking the chapters, I was nevertheless mindful of the need to avoid watering down the writing with an inappropriate political correctness that might undermine Aoham al Dujali’s voice as she expressed her clear sense of relief from constraint.
Interviews from the field

I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with asylum seekers and others, most of whom are listed in the dramatis personae at the start of the artefact. In some cases, the interviews were conducted with the help of interpreters. In other cases, they were able to tell their stories in English. Fiona Devine writes of the virtue of in depth interviewing with “open-ended questions and informal probing to facilitate a discussion of issues in a semi-structured or unstructured manner. Intensive interviewing, for example, allows people to talk freely and to offer interpretation of events,” she writes. “It is their perspective that is paramount…” (Devine in Marsh and Stoker, 1997, p. 138)

Such is the lure of the story that the Chicago radio presenter, oral historian and author, Studs Terkel, once likened the interview process to prospecting for gold. “I hear about a certain person...and I head for him like a gold prospector heads for California. The gold prospector starts digging and I start asking questions and up comes all this ore...all these sixty pages transcribed. Now you gotta find the gold dust...so I start editing, cutting...It’s not just gold dust; it becomes a ring, a watch, a necklace, a tiara.” (in Huber and Diggins, 1993, p. 206)

When I approached asylum seekers and their supporters involved in Kan Yama Kan, the task was made easier because, with few exceptions, they were familiar with me and my work as a journalist. Though there were some misgivings about the media’s coverage in that era, I benefited from goodwill.

Journalist and author Gay Talese once said: “Interviewing isn't a con game. It is not even a game. It is a quest at least as I see it, for the expansion of knowledge in areas where there has been darkness or misunderstanding.” (in Huber and Diggins, 1993, p.214) But you have to take care not to take your interviewees for granted. As I have written, when I asked Michael Aboujundi why he had agreed to go back to Woomera with me for the sake of a feature story when it clearly distressed him to even think about the former detention centre, he said that he had been speaking to his partner days earlier and recalled that I had specifically offered to arrange counselling if he decided to do so. This surprised me because I have never arranged counselling for any interviewee in my decades in journalism and suspect that this was at the suggestion of an editor wary of causing him trauma. I would like to take credit for the initiative but it was probably another’s.
You cannot lose sight of the privileged position you occupy as interviewer. “The interviewer’s job is to create an environment, as in a good conversation, in which the person eavesdropping doesn’t feel guilty about eavesdropping, but feels delighted because he's invited, and is sharing a moment of true communication, a true encounter,” US journalist and political commentator Bill Moyers once said. (in Huber and Diggins, 1993 p. 257)

Among the first I approached after deciding to write this book, Michael was determined from the outset to have his story told. When it was clear to me that he would be a central character, I warned him that some people had objected to aspects of an earlier book, The Wild Almond Line. I thought he should know that there was a chance that he might not approve of aspects of A Knock at the Door. But rather than shy away from the project as I might have feared, Michael told me there was a saying where he came from that you could set fire to your own fingers to lead others into darkness and some would still complain.

When interviewing, you never lose sight that what you are after is not just facts. Bill Moyers identified the key element - “a sense of story, an intuition for the dramatic - that is, the unfolding of a tale that is a part of all of our lives” (in Huber and Diggins, 1993 p.259) Once you have the makings of a story, it is difficult to let go. Journalists quickly learn to be cautious. We are wary of giving up control of the narrative. We hope to minimise the chances of being manipulated by politicians or others’ spin. But at times we hold fast where we might better relinquish control.

I was uneasy when I sent each participant in A Knock at the Door a copy of the material in which they were quoted, asking them to indicate if they were “comfortable” with the words. As a journalist, it seemed to me that I was putting valuable material at risk and might well lose content that was integral to the narrative and of public interest. But it turned out to be well worth that the act of faith. None have so far sought to undermine the integrity of the story, responding in such a way that they invariably strengthened it instead.

There is no clearer example of this than Michael’s response after indicating initially that he saw no fault in the thousands of words and I sent him, then later conceding there was just one. When I describe the exchange between him and Mohammad al Janabi in Chapter One, he suggests taking the play all the way to Canberra. In the draft I sent him, Mohammad’s response was “anything is possible”. But this, Michael assured me, was not what his friend had said. I had recorded the interview and was confident that I had it right. But Michael
cited the Arabic word (“mostaheel”) uttered by Mohammad. “Impossible,” he had said. I was delighted to hear this. Not only did enable me to correct a serious error but added tension to the narrative at a crucial point.

The telling is only possible with the goodwill, trust and generosity of those who shared their narrative – as well as material including video, DVD, script, archival material et cetera. I am the beneficiary of this good faith and this is something you cannot take for granted. In the end, I have no doubt that some might well question aspects including my own place in the narrative. But the process has enabled me to proceed without the inevitable disquiet had I not sought a response from each.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) write: “Autoethnographers thus consider "relational concerns" as a crucial dimension of inquiry (Ellis, 2007, p.25; Trahar, 2009) that must be kept uppermost in their minds throughout the research and writing process. On many occasions, this obligates autoethnographers to show their work to others implicated in or by their texts, allowing these others to respond, and/or acknowledging how these others feel about what is being written about them and allowing them to talk back to how they have been represented in the text.”

For some, the interviews were inevitably confronting. In Chapter Twenty Four, I describe a party for Hazara asylum seeker, Mohammed Arif, at a big house he was building on the outer eastern edge of suburbia for his wife Zahra, their Afghan-born son, Navid, and Australian-born toddler, Nima. Navid was just a few years old when his twin sister and another, a teenager, died after Arif left them to seek refuge for his family. I had interviewed him at his home weeks earlier and write that: “...I put it to Arif that I regretted causing him to revisit the painful past by interviewing him about this period. At times the telling was harrowing. You feel you are drawing too close to raw hurt and want to pull back.” When I sent him extracts from A Knock at the Door, I thought he might no longer want his story told. But I was wrong. He had no concern with what I had written. Only one person asked that I withdraw a significant section and he/she was not an asylum seeker.

**Other Sources**

I drew on various audiovisual and other material – some of which I outline below – while creating the artefact.
Kan Yama Kan director Robin Laurie made available to me a DVD of a film of opening night at Trades Hall in 2002. She also made available to me scripts from a performance at the Spiegltent after the Bali bombing and two versions of the script as it was performed in Canberra. This material was invaluable. Carmel Davies, the ESL teacher who initiated this production and its predecessor, loaned me a video of Without My Mother’s Hand which I had transferred into DVD format. The audiovisual material enabled me to describe the players’ appearances, gestures and expressions as well as the setting. The scripts allowed me to ensure the accuracy of quotes from the productions.

Davies also loaned me media clippings, letters and other material including: notes from Arnold Zable to the Kan Yama Kan co-directors written “after discussions with Robin (Laurie) about structure and some of the challenges that have arisen from the workshops, availability of actors from a variety of backgrounds, and so on...”; details of a 22-minute film produced by Fitzroy Learning Network titled Stories of Survival that documented the experiences of three refugees from Vietnam and Laos who learned English at the centre; a copy of the typed script of Without My Mother’s Hand, with a handwritten reminder to ask people to turn off all mobile phones; flyers and programs for Kan Yama Kan; curriculum vitae for Majid Shokor and Kate Durham and a biographical note on Mohamed al Janabi; the transcript of a song by Kavisha Mazzella called, Kindness of Strangers; an article by Aoham, The Winged Lion, in which she recalled her flight with her children, which formed the basis of her account in Kan Yama Kan; a preliminary budget for Kan Yama Kan and notes on the production when it had been working title Scars on the Soul; the letter her son sent to Alamdar Bakhtiyari in Woomera which was returned around the time of the brothers’ escape; the third edition of a 2002 pamphlet called The Worst of Woomera by Dave and Cherry McKay; fact sheets on refugees from the Refugee Action Collective; a typed statement of intent by Actors for Refugees; and a copy of the 2002 study, Politics of Social Exclusion: Refugees on Temporary Protection Visa in Victoria, by Fethi Mansour at Deakin University’s Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights and Melek Bagdas, of the Victorian Arabic Social Services (VASS).

The Woomera Lawyers Group provided a chronology compiled from the detention centre’s opening in December 1999. Fitzroy Learning Network allowed access to its archives, making available material including: Fulbright student Anne Heinz’s typed account of the November
2003 trip to Canberra with Kan Yama Kan and the Refugees Say Thank you group; minutes from a Tuesday, October 14, 2003 meeting at Fitzroy learning network to plan the Canberra trip the following month; a copy of the document, Act of Humanity, urging him politicians to raise the plight of asylum seekers with their parties and in Parliament “as a matter of urgency” initiated by the Coalition to End the Suffering which included Arnold Zable, Linda Briskman, Anne Horrigan- Dixon, Judith Dixon and Brigid Arthur; a December 17, 2003 letter to then opposition leader, Mark Latham, co-signed by Refugees say Thank co-convenors “Usama Aboujundi, Mohammed Arif Fayazi and Hamed Saberi; the 2004 report Opening Doors to Our Community. A Framework for Engaging Victoria’s Newest Residents – Refugees, Temporary Protection Visa Holders and Asylum Seekers, by Louise Humpage at the Centre for Applied Research, RMIT University, with the Fitzroy Learning Network.

Librarians at The Age gave me online access to not only their newspaper but coverage in the Herald-Sun of asylum seekers/refugees in the late 1990s-early 2000s. They also enabled me to photocopy extensive hard copy newspaper clippings on coverage of the Vietnamese refugees which enabled me to gain some insight on similarities and differences between the responses to people who came by boat in the respective eras. I kept notebooks, tape recordings, files of scholarly and other reports, relevant feature articles, books and much else accumulated while covering the issue and was able to draw on much of it.

I was able to draw on my own extensive coverage and material I had retained from the early 2000s including a list of items for sale in a fax from Evans Clarke Dominion Valuers and Auctioneers of South Australia for the May 31, 2003 “Woomera detention centre disposal” and cassette tape on which I had recorded an interview with Kate Durham talking about her trip to Nauru with BBC journalist Sarah MacDonald. I recorded the interview at her home for The Sunday Age on June 20, 2002 but hadn’t transcribed it because another journalist had visited her earlier that week and reported on this for The Age that Saturday. Had Andrew Rule’s story not appeared that day, I would have written it for the Sunday paper. I was thankful years on that I had the foresight not to discard or record over the tape.

The value of a reflexive journal

A key challenge was to ensure an appropriate relationship between the book and exegesis. I came to regard the endeavours in writing the artefact and exegesis as a tunnelling from
either side of a mountain where each tunnel must meet the other in the middle, or at least not pass each other by.

As suggested by Professor Josie Arnold in her book, I kept a reflexive journal - a “bridge between the two components of the PhD” (Arnold 2007, p.8) – on the processes of reading, writing and thinking about the project. Professor Arnold notes that the easiest way to understand such a journal is as “the data of the exegesis” written after completion of the book. I drew heavily on the notes I’d kept in the reflexive journal when writing the exegesis. Soon after completing a first draft of the artefact, I typed up the extensive hand-written notes so that I could more easily access them. I then printed this material and noted themes and questions which were addressed/raised on various pages. I used this when shaping the structure for the exegesis.

I noted down thoughts and ideas through much of the process of writing the artefact. At times, I would write down a word or two, sometimes several paragraphs. This was a rough sketch of scrawled notes, not intended as coherent commentary of a kind I associate with the letters John Steinbeck wrote to his editor friend, Pascal Covici, later published as Journal of a Novel: The East of Eden Letters. (Steinbeck 1970). “The form will not be startling, the writing will be spare and lean, the concept hard, the philosophy old and yet new born. In a sense it will be two books – the story of my country and the story of me,” Steinbeck wrote in an early letter (Steinbeck 1970, p. 13).

I was trying to tease out themes and ideas. I considered whether I was deliberately excluding anything that might fit the exegesis or whether this freed me up from having to include material that might interrupt the narrative flow. The hand-written notes on ruled note pads augmented on occasion by thoughts that might occur to me at odd hours which I would email to myself on the iPhone – yielded material not just for the exegesis but the book itself. In this sense, it did serve as a bridge, linking both aspects of the thesis. This may or may not have encouraged the reflectiveness in the artefact that I feared at one stage I might have to edit out to ensure a clear distinction between artefact and exegesis.

I came to regard the journal as an invaluable resource and the observations in the notes essential in researching a link between the self and broader culture. “The narrative of self inevitably leads to mining oneself as data,” Josie Arnold wrote (Arnold, J, 2011, p. 72). “That this occurs within the academy means a shift in recognition of what makes knowledge and,
emphatically, who is the storyteller in that process. It also means that the self recognises that the subjective story is not stand-alone; others are inevitably involved."
Chapter Four: The neglect of media perspectives

Scholarly research showing compromise to the integrity of media coverage is at the heart of this PhD. For this reason, I have dedicated two chapters to considering the impact of journalistic practice on the artefact.

When I set out to explore the issue, I was motivated by a sense of disquiet based on my experience as a journalist entrusted with covering issues related to migration, including asylum seekers and refugees. As I researched the topic, scholarly papers overwhelmingly suggested that media coverage was undermined during this period. Later, when I considered the hundreds of related stories I wrote that were published by the newspapers for which I was working at the time, The Sunday Age and to a lesser extent The Age, it occurred to me that the fact of their publication suggested I might have underestimated the will and determination of colleagues to cover the issue. As I considered the scholarly work on media coverage of asylum seekers, I realised that perspective of journalists was missing. For some time I regarded this limitation as a failure. It seemed to me then that academics ought to have engaged with media practitioners. But I later conceded that academics could argue with some validity that it is the media texts and evidence of censorship that matter because these were what would most obviously impact on public opinion.

But even if it was tempting to seize on this gap in the literature defensively, as it somehow discredited the extensive academic work, I was unable to conclude that the academics who had criticised journalists were necessarily wrong or that the research was necessarily flawed. Australian media appeared to have fallen short of our own ideals. A primary focus of my research then was on perceptions of media performance at the time.

Kan Yama Kan: a case study on media priorities

Frustrated by difficulties with narrative structure at one stage and fearing I might not complete it, I abandoned work on the artefact and exegesis and explored a different approach to an issue at the heart of this PhD, seeking to examine media coverage of asylum seekers and refugees by comparing reportage in the Fraser- and Howard eras. I intended then to conduct semi-structured interviews with journalists who reported on the arrival of
the Vietnamese from the mid-1970s and Iraqis, Afghans, Iranians and others from the late 1990s.

Ideally, I would have featured comment by veteran political journalist Michelle Grattan. I emailed Grattan in July 2014 that I was writing a book, as part of a PhD, on a group of asylum seekers and refugee activists who performed a song-and-storytelling play, *Kan Yama Kan*, in Parliament House, Canberra, in November 2003. While inside Parliament House, some of the players – Iraqis, Afghans, Iranians and others – took part in a media conference during which a Hazara teenager broke down describing her fears of being returned to Afghanistan and attended pre-arranged meetings with politicians including then-Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone to plead for the right to remain in Australia.

Grattan replied soon afterwards: “Hi Larry nice to hear from you. But can't help - sorry - I don't remember that event. Maybe there has been a mix up and I was not the one reporting it. Cheers, Michelle.”

Asylum seeker supporters involved in the production insisted that she had seen one of the performances – if not in Parliament House then one of two in a small Canberra venue a day earlier, and written about it.

I searched for such an article – and enlisted the support of an *Age* librarian – without success. The only article in that publication was written by a staffer, David Wroe.

I might have confused Grattan by writing to her that the performance she was alleged to have attended was in Federal Parliament, not as I later realised as I continued to work on the artefact, in a Canberra theatre the previous day.

**Finding the broader significance**

As discussed earlier, Amanda Vanstone emailed me in response to my questions about the meeting that though her memory was good “going back 11 years is just a tad too far”.

Former Federal MP and WA Premier Carmen Lawrence was among the very few to watch the Parliament House show. I asked her why such an event seemed to have gone relatively unnoticed. “The sheer volume of stuff that you get confronted with as a journalist and as a
“member of Parliament,” she explained. “The things that you remember are often not the obvious things that you think you might...”

Mark Madden, Anne Horrigan-Dixon and Lara McKinley among organisers seemed convinced that the Canberra trip – with Kan Yama Kan an integral part of a larger Refugees Say Thank You campaign - changed the direction and led to a softening of policy towards asylum seekers.

Michael Aboujundi’s initiative to take the show to Canberra “changed the nation”, Anne Horrigan-Dixon told me. Even if we can make no such bold claim for it, it is worth considering why such an event might have seemed marginal to those reporting on Federal politics from Canberra in November 2003. I suspect that this might have to do with notions of “hard” news that favours reporting of comment by authorities and fact and figures, rather than the kind of “soft”, “human interest” stories that needed to be told at the time.

“The essential difference between the content of hard news and soft news is that hard news is news of consequence, while soft news is news that is unusual, strange and entertaining,” Sally White wrote (White 1996, p.229). White writes elsewhere in her book that, “the primary purpose of hard news is to inform. Soft news is often called human interest news because it concentrates on individuals as people rather than as citizens.” (White 1996, p.27)

Refugees Say Thank You strategist Madden knew the value of the Kan Yama Kan players’ personal stories. As he says in the artefact: “The best advocates were these people themselves...They left their families in very dangerous circumstances ... (and) took huge risks to get to a place that they believed represented a new life, a new opportunity and some of the values that they believed in and we take for granted. You have to humanise them not only through the media but also get them in front of the decision-makers. That was the genesis of it.”

Madden, an ex-journalist, was disappointed with the coverage. “I came out of journalism with a very strong belief the Fourth Estate had a vital role to play in a democracy. It was about keeping governments honest and all that sort of stuff.” He believed the Canberra press gallery was too dependent on government as a source of information, too distant from people they were reporting about. The reportage rarely provided an international
context and often resorted to the language of the government, wrongly describing asylum seekers, for instance, as “illegal”. “What was missing,” Madden is quoted as saying in the artefact (Chapter Eighteen), “was decent journalism.”

In a paper on government and media stereotyping, Michael Leach and Fethi Mansouri (2003) quote Pickering: “With few exceptions, reports on asylum seekers and refugees have not been interested in listening to the voices of asylum seekers, nor of home country conditions or conditions of flight. When alternative views are offered, they are usually presented as ‘human interest’ stories rather than ‘hard’ news.”

Matthew Ricketson writes: “Stories written in the inverted pyramid formula are known in the industry as hard news. The more information, the harder the story. Emotions are hived off into soft news. In newsrooms the term hard news connotes importance and seriousness, while soft news connotes the reverse. It is a testosterone-fuelled world view, one satirised in the Australian series about television current affairs programs, Frontline, where any journalist flinching from the most intrusive or inflammatory stories was labelled a ‘soft-cock’. Newspaper offices share many of the same values. Driven by information, hard news excludes a good deal, with strange results. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in a news editor’s philosophy.” (Ricketson, M, 2004, p.3-4) Ricketson notes (p. 4) that the inverted pyramid format “flounders” in failing to convey anything other than information. It “corrals information into dry phraselets” and is unable to convey context.

It would be interesting to consider the impact of the many personal stories that became possible only after the release of the first TPV holders in mid-2000. It might be instructive to be shown a clear example of a “human interest” story that ought to have been presented as hard news and discuss the way in which its presentation undermined the impact. Again, a journalist’s insights on the ways stories are presented would have been useful. Personal stories of a kind some of us sought out at the time and told by players in Kan Yama Kan to counter narrative perspectives fostered by government surely best told as “human interest” rather than “hard” news.

As a journalist who reported on what Peter Mares (2002, p. xii) termed “personal stories”, I recall that asylum seekers were not just prepared to speak out – but in some cases eager to do so – regardless of possible consequences. They wanted their story out. If the value of “soft” is acknowledged and the “personal” stories tallied, I suspect we will find a far more
nuanced perspective on media coverage at the time than Julian Burnside’s assertion suggested would be the case when looking back a decade on.

The inverted pyramid style form inevitably leads to the pressure to include certain information prominently – what, who, where, when, how and why – to privilege or preference certain information. We tend to rely on comment from powerful/prominent people and downplay/under estimate others. It is of concern in an industry in which “hard” news invariably trumps “colour” that if we are not careful what is deemed hard might turn out to be what the Minister says at a press conference or in a media release.

**Repositioning the issue in academia**

When I embarked on the PhD, I strongly suspected that we in the media had not covered this issue as well as we might have. I did not know this for certain. A journalism academic has told me that when I articulated my motivation for the study in the early stages, I revealed some anger on the issue. Then I read the extensive scholarly research and must admit that for a while felt vindicated – at least until I realised the limits of this research.

As noted, the media’s role is called into question repeatedly in its reporting on asylum seekers and refugees in the period we are considering. Natascha Klocker and Kevin M. Dunn (2003) write that in 2001 and 2002 the media largely adopted the “negativity and specific references of the government”. They suggest this was partly explained by a reliance on government statements and spokespeople and “the findings generally support the ‘propaganda model’ that holds a pessimistic view of the news media’s critical abilities.” They cite a report by journalists Mike Seccombe and Andrew Clennell in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (2002) on how debate over asylum seekers had been muddied by “rhetoric and the language of fear” and concern by the Refugee Council of Australia that the media had produced a “climate of fear” that was being used to “legitimise the introduction of draconian policies”.

Klocker and Dunn used content analysis to examine the extent to which the media had adopted the references in government media releases from August 2001 to January 2002. They measured positive and negative terms used to describe asylum seekers and made some comparison with government propaganda decades ago to persuade Australians of the
virtues of new migrants. “Unlike the post-World War II migration program, the emphasis has been to generate public concern and to construct the migrants involved as an alien ‘other’. Nonetheless, the process is a similar one, with the state driving public opinion through the media.” (Klocker and Dunn 2003)

Kate Slattery (2003) writes that the “children overboard” claims supposedly based on naval reports, “appeared to demonise the asylum seekers, depicting them as evil and inhuman”. The “children overboard” incident, she concluded, was “a constructed ‘media event’ used to reinforce public attitudes towards the asylum seeker ‘other’ and to reaffirm an Australian ‘self’ — that of a ‘good’, ‘moral’ Australian citizen.” Most morning newspapers ran front-page stories about the event with much information quoted from government sources and officials from the previous day’s press conferences. Only two of nine newspapers surveyed had recognised any link between the incident and political electioneering. These had included a front-page report in The Australian, headlined ‘Boat Children Overboard: Howard Hard Line Becomes Poll Focus’.

With much of the focus on words, it is interesting to read Mary Macken-Horarik’s discussion of notions of framing (two images from a folder of 130 photographs released to the media from that October 11) and “voicing” she has chosen to explore presentations of the ‘children overboard’ story. “Like the US campaign for war against Iraq 18 months later, the children overboard affair depended heavily on the covert power of photographs to support the ‘contextualising’ arguments supplied by powerful others,” she writes. “In fact, verbiage and image were both crucial resources in the campaign to get widespread acceptance of the credibility of the story.” (Macken-Horarik 2003)

Macken-Horarik cited the headline (“Cruel Sea”) and sub-heading, “Proof that boat people threw children overboard” for a Daily Telegraph story that told its readers: “This is one of two dramatic photographs the Navy was forced to release yesterday after accounts of boat people jumping into the sea were challenged”.

“It is not sensible to dismiss the story as just gutter-press journalism,” writes Macken-Horarik, who claims that “cruel” in the headline is intended to reflect on the asylum seekers, not the sea. “It emerged, in part, from the severe restrictions on media access to all personnel involved in border protection imposed by the government at the time. While this ‘no story’ story is the inevitable outcome of such restrictions, it also played on the
xenophobic fears of the population at this time, wilfully exploited by politicians desperate to return to power and willing to play the ‘race card’ to get there.” I wondered what an editor or sub-editor might make of the suggestion that they had deliberately used the title of an early 1950s novel by Nicholas Monsarrat to undermine readers’ confidence in people seeking refuge here.

Peter Gale (2004) examined media representations of asylum seekers and refugees in national and regional newspapers between August and December 2001 including a Weekend Australian report in which asylum seekers are mentioned in the same breath (report) as drug dealers and gun runners and the sea “is labelled as Australia’s point of vulnerability”.

“What can be concluded from this analysis of media reporting on the refugee crisis and the political discourse leading up to the 2001 election is that liberal democratic nation states such as Australia will continue to be receptive to a politics of fear,” Gale writes. “What is required is a politics that seeks to enhance the reception of refugees by host populations with a policy that is not founded on fear of the Other.”

It was through the writings of Polish journalist and author Ryszard Kapuscinski that I first became aware of writings on “otherness” by Krakow theologian Father Jozef Tischner who was influenced by the Lithuanian-born philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas.

Kapuscinski wrote: “Levinas...says you must not only meet the Other, accept him and converse with him, but you must also take responsibility for him...Here our interest in Levinas’ thesis about the fundamental meaning of difference – that we accept the Other, although he is different, and that this difference, this otherness is rich and valuable, it is a good thing. Yet at the same time this difference does not erase my identification with the Other: ‘I am someone Other.’” (Kapuscinski 2008, p.35)

Kapuscinski witnessed at least 27 revolutions and coups in 50 countries in Africa and Latin America by the time I interviewed him at the Melbourne Writers Festival for a feature that appeared in The Sunday Age on October 29 1995. Kapuscinski told me: “You can't do this kind of job on your own. Never. Sometimes you have to get to the front line; it can only be at the goodwill of some commander. Sometimes you need food in the desert; it is the
goodwill of the desert people. To be respectful to these people, I think, is fundamental . . . it is something that comes very naturally to me.”

His comment reminds me of the sometimes delicate relationship between journalists and the people they write about. The challenge is to gain respect by being fair and accurate but not just compliant. I have written stories in the past which upset those I’ve written about. I’m sure there are people who would not trust me to tell their stories – though I hope they are few in number. I can only assume I was able to proceed with this artefact because the people I wrote about were confident that I would not betray them. I was not alone in this approach. Despite widespread mistrust of journalists, confirmed for some by scholarly research on coverage of asylum seekers, there are missing voices of practitioners who might give valuable insights on a profession which many come to regard as a vocation.

“It is my view, that journalists are principally responsible for keeping the ideal of the news media as the Fourth Estate alive, despite significant and sustainable challenges to the industry’s independent institutional legitimacy,” Julianne Schultz has written. “This is a responsibility some journalist find onerous. For others it holds the key to professional and public esteem.” (Schultz 1998, pp.16 -17)

Kieran O’Doherty and Amanda Lecouteur (2007) examine two articles, from The Age (1 May 2001) and The Advertiser (16 June 2001), and explore the way in which inappropriate labels and categories including “illegal immigrants” and “boat people” can help marginalise people and legitimise and justify the government actions. They argue that the categories commonly used are problematic because the nationalities, political status, legal status and alleged intentions seem to vary considerably and suggest an alternative label, “unexpected arrivals” for the purpose of the study.

O’Doherty and Martha Augoustinos (2008) analyse print media that invoked a nationalist discourse in coverage of the so-called ‘Tampa crisis’ during which SAS troops boarded the Norwegian vessel in August 2001. They examined two news reports, a comment piece and three letters to the editor and write that arguments relying on the notion of nationhood and national identity worked to legitimate. The Australian government’s role in these events and helped marginalise asylum seekers. The authors say the reports “effectively portray asylum seekers as enemies of the nation and, positioned in this way, their extreme marginalisation becomes conceivable, even desirable” and military action is justified because they are seen
to be a threat to the sovereignty of Australia. They say an opinion piece by conservative commentator, Michael Duffy, entitled ‘Outraged elite all lost at sea” uses “banal nationalistic referents” to legitimise the government’s actions in the face of international criticism.

It would perhaps have been useful to know if there was a deliberate imbalance in the proportion of viewpoints represented, assuming this can be measured. Quoting Duffy, or for that matter, a few letter writers, may tell us more about a sector of public opinion than media.

Angela Romano (2007, p.183) writes that a “surge since 1999 in the number of stories in the Australian news media about asylum seekers...” might have provided a valuable community service by focussing attention on social, economic and political causes as well as implications of boat arrivals. However, she claims analyses of news reports found that journalists had “missed the boat” in their presentation of issues. Journalists had undermined public sympathy by “using the language of fear” (Romano 2007, p. 185) and uncritically reported directly or in implied suggestions that asylum seekers might threaten our national security and stability and possibly even be terrorists. Newspaper stories had used interchangeably terms such as “asylum seekers”, “refugees”, “boat people”, “illegals” and “illegal immigrants”.

“Many studies repeatedly indicate that politicians and government officials, particularly those from the federal Immigration Department, were highly and disproportionately influential in framing public discussion on asylum seekers and refugees from 1999 to 2001,” Romano writes (p.186). “Further analysis of the coverage indicates that few journalists immediately recognised the degree to which the public and media debate was being skewed by vested political interests in the lead-up to the 2001 federal election.”

Romano studied more recent news and feature stories in a three-month period in The Courier Mail and The Australian between September 1 and November 30 2006. The study showed that though the Brisbane newspaper had published fewer (16) stories on asylum seekers and refugees than the national broadsheet (35) in this period, but was less likely to rely on politicians and government sources (22 per cent to The Australians’ 49.5 per cent)
and more likely to quote asylum seekers and refugees (p.189). “Australian journalists have struggled with a variety of challenges in covering asylum seeker and refugee issues since 1999,” Romano writes (p. 194). “The news media’s discussion agenda has been dominated by politicians. Asylum seekers and refugees have had far less input than is desirable given their central role in the issues.”

*The Courier Mail* used more asylum seekers and refugees as sources and “its effort seems impressive given that journalists need to work hard to develop contacts with asylum seekers and refugees and win their trust” (Romano p.189). It would be interesting to know how prominently stories based on such sources were featured compared to reports based on information from government press releases and interviews.

**The cost of ignoring the journalistic voice**

It might seem mischievous to suggest that media professionals involved in the coverage be afforded an opportunity to voice their opinions. After all, they would seem to be empowered in their ability to shape stories and articulate their views. But their varied perspectives and opinions would be all the more valuable in assessing the media role and performance at the time.

One of the unintended consequences of the absence of journalist’s perspective in scholarly research on the extent to which the media was hampered by “spin” in the Howard government era is that, as far as I know, relatively few journalists are aware that there is a substantial body of work by academics on media coverage in this period. Had journalists been alerted to the studies/been invited to respond and engage, we in industry might be better prepared to deal with strategies to manipulate a media all the more vulnerable after widespread redundancies in recent years.

Even if there is no obligation, I believe the scholars have missed the opportunity to engage in dialogue with practitioners in ways that might have given us a fuller understanding of the coverage and led journalists who are I suspect largely unaware of the research a chance to not only explain actions but learn from flaws and failures highlighted in the research.

Denis Muller and Michael Gawenda, of the Centre for Advanced Journalism at the University of Melbourne conducted semi-structured in depth interviews with 28 people involved in
covering the February 2009 Victorian Black Saturday bushfires in which 15 people died. They spoke to reporters, photographers, camera operators, video journalists, producers, presenters, news executives, editors and news directors, among others.

In his foreword, Gawenda, a former Age editor, wrote:

“Journalists hardly ever get time to think about the work, to reflect on the issues they encountered in covering a ‘big’ story, or, as in this case, to think about how they related to news desks, to authorities and to the victims and survivors, or to talk about how covering a story like the Black Saturday fires affected them personally. This research project gave participating journalists the chance to talk about all these issues. It gave them the chance to think about ethical questions they had faced, to consider what the purpose and goals of the coverage were and, in that context, what they did well and less well and what they learnt from the days and weeks they spent covering Black Saturday and its aftermath. I believe those who participated in the interviews found the experience personally and professionally valuable.

“The media also rarely takes the time to reflect upon – and examine – how the coverage of an event like Black Saturday affected the people they reported on. Individual journalists, editors and news producers do consider this I know, but we do not investigate the impact we have on people and their lives in a systematic way. This, in my view, is a mistake and goes to the question of just how accountable journalists are for the work they do. I believe the more accountable we are, the more we will be trusted by the communities we serve…” (Muller and Gawenda 2011, pp.6-7)

I can recall the challenge of reporting on the aftermath of bushfires where you might be suspected of the cynical pursuit of words and photographs regardless of trauma. You learn to work cautiously and respectfully with people who have suffered trauma. When I first worked as a journalist in Australia in the 1980s, newsrooms commonly had designated ethnic affairs reporters. Perhaps this was because of the massive demographic change in a decade or more since the end of the so-called White Australia Policy and arrival of a significant number of Vietnamese “boat people”. Journalists entrusted with this round or beat were as likely as transport, crime, health or other reporters to develop not just contacts but a grasp of the context that would enable them to report on the nuances of a complex issue and understand, for instance, the implication of being a signatory to a United
Nations convention whereby we were required to provide a safe haven for people fleeing desperate circumstances – an understanding which would not allow us to dismiss them as “unlawful” let alone “queue jumpers”.
Chapter Five: How the media missed the mark

Parodying popular discourse at the time

I don’t recall my response to a scene in which performers parodied a television interview with an asylum seeker at a performance of *Kan Yama Kan* the week it opened in July 2002. The “interview” in which actor Lisa Maza, playing a TV interviewer, questioned Iraqi asylum seeker Mohammad al-Janabi about his journey to Australia must have seemed too crude a caricature to reflect actual practice. Introducing her interviewee, Maza’s character tells viewers she is “going to address some of the issues that most Australians are concerned about”. What follows is a seemingly congenial interrogation aimed at demonstrating that al-Janabi, who describes his own misadventures en route here, has repeatedly failed to do the right thing and join “the queue”.

Why didn’t you join the queue in Iraq? The TV journalist asks. Why not join a queue in Turkey? Surely they had an Australian or at least a US embassy in Iran? Did he find a queue in Pakistan? Maza’s character betrays the prejudices of an affluent westerner, preoccupied with places in which the asylum seeker has been imprisoned or from which he has been deported with cheery comment on duty free shopping, “fine old” architecture, celebrities and sport ("Imran Khan, Jemima, the cricket...”) This is crudely drawn. Was there ever such ignorance about perceived queue jumping lampooned in this way? Perhaps. But the scene would not have swayed me.

The counter-narrative role in the *Kan Yama Kan* TV interview scene allows Mohammad al-Janabi, who is featured with Michael Aboujundii in the first chapters of *A Knock at the Door*, to address one of the common misconceptions of the time – that asylum seekers were “queue jumpers”.

In a 2004 analysis of populist politics and media discourse, Peter Gale has written that front page headlines such as ‘People-smugglers push Howard’s limits and Boatpeople turn hostile in ocean standoff’ “reflect the negative stereotypes that are commonly used to represent refugees and the means by which they arrive in Australia.. The boat people were represented as ‘illegal’ arrivals or ‘queue jumpers’, and possible terrorists entering the country. In parallel with the media reporting and political discourse on the ‘war against
terrorism’, ‘border protection’ was represented as part of a war against the Other.” (Gale 2004)

Michael Leach and Fethi Mansouri (2003) have written that while playing on notions of fairness and orderliness, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock likened onshore asylum seekers to "thieves" who "steal" places from genuine refugees. “Despite the absence of any real 'queue' in receiving countries such as Pakistan, Iran and Indonesia,” they wrote, “this language has been effective in depicting asylum seekers as a deviant group unworthy of protection.”

In Kan Yama Kan’s TV interview scene, Mohammad al-Janabi tells of flight from Iraq after his brother’s execution. He describes his escape across the mountains to Iran after being sent back by Turkish authorities where he had been jailed for two months. He tells of threats by guards at the UN office in Teheran, another six months in jail in Pakistan, and so on. In the artefact, the TV interview scene provides a useful reminder of context – a play performed to tell stories skewed in media presentations.

It is worth remembering how widespread was this antagonism towards those who were perceived to be seeking inappropriate advantage after arriving here on boats. In the artefact (Chapter Twenty Two), Mohammed Arif recalled a meeting with a Liberal MP in her Parliament House office during the Canberra visit. “She said why did you jump the queue?” Arif recalled. Someone in the group responded that if you have a hungry lion behind you, there is no choice but to try to escape. It is, or should be by now, common knowledge that there is no orderly process that guarantees asylum seekers reach a safe destination. But the suggestion of seeking unfair advantage by “jumping” some perceived queue plays at our notion of fairness and is designed to ensure resistance to people seeking our assistance.

In an award-winning book on the sinking in October 2001 of the Christmas Island-bound Indonesian fishing boat known SIEV X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel X) that resulted in the death of 353 passengers, former Australian diplomat Tony Kevin writes: “Howard and his then powerful head of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Max Moore-Wilton, saw the task as a whole-of-government issue from the beginning – and national security operation matter that also needed a supporting public information strategy. Central to that strategy was to lodge two ideas firmly in the consciousness of national security agencies and the public, that Australia’s national sovereignty was being threatened by boat people.
entering through ‘porous’ Maritime borders, and that people smuggling was a big and rapidly growing international criminal business...

“Over 2000-01, these two messages – with enthusiastic help from mainstream media, which saw the news value in them – were driven home. We were all being indoctrinated to fear and hate the people smugglers and to dehumanise their ‘human cargo’ which, it was claimed, threatened the integrity of our borders. “All successful propaganda campaigns into an existing cultural base. The Nazis tapped into layers of anti-Semitism, albeit that Jews have been safe enough before the Nazis came to power. Certainly fear of uncontrolled arrivals of boat people, and the cultural problems some Australians have in accepting Middle Eastern Muslims, were already there in sections of the populace. Howard was happy stir up this is potent devil’s brew. Previous prime ministers – Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating – had tried to lead Australians away from such visceral fears and prejudices. Howard set out to take the nation back again.” (Kevin 2004, pp.21 - 22)

Alison Saxton (2003) writes that previous research demonstrated that Western understandings of Muslims were “pervasively negative” and that (predominantly Muslim) asylum seekers were depicted in terms of a perceived threat, “to support nationalist discourses concerning national rights and preserve a positive national identity”.

The media’s role in that period can be measured in how it responded to the “spin”. In his preface to the second edition in 2002 of the book, Borderline, Peter Mares suggests the media coverage evolved. “In the first edition of the book I was very critical of the Australian media’s failure to pay adequate attention to the asylum seeker issue, and of the sensationalist nature of much of the reporting that did occur. Some of these criticisms remain... But things have changed since then, at least at the quality end of the media. Many journalists are now working tenaciously to ferret out hidden facts and document personal stories.” (Mares 2002, p.x11)

Though I read this as acknowledgement of a positive contribution in broadening our understanding of others, a determination to “ferret out” personal stories could be problematic.

David Corlett devotes the first chapter of his book, Following them Home. The Fate of the Returned Asylum Seekers, to the Bakhtiyari family (Corlett 2005, pp. 13-47). He describes
coverage in *The Sun-Herald* by Andrew West, Matthew Benns and Pakistani Saleem Shahid who went to Quetta to investigate competing claims over Ali Bakhtiyari’s origins; *The Australian’s* Andrew McLeod who died in a car crash in Afghanistan; and *The Age’s* Russell Skelton, who has worked at the ABC in recent years. Corlett notes that in rejecting an appeal by Ali Bakhtiyari, Refugee Tribunal Review member Giles Short gave “due weight” to the reports from Afghanistan by McLeod and Skelton and “great weight” to the newspaper report from Quetta in Pakistan by Benns and Shahid. (Corlett 2005, p.35) He writes: “Although Skelton’s article ultimately played an important part in the Bakhtiyari case, it seems to me significant that he did not canvass the range of factors that might have militated against him being able to confirm Ali’s identity. For example, while he noted the widespread displacement of Afghans over decades, he did not see a possible link between this and his inability to find someone who might vouch Ali’s identity. Nor did he discuss the fluid and uncertain nature of maps of Afghanistan as an impediment to his finding what he searched for. He may have indeed been asking about the wrong person; even if Ali had been from the area Skelton was visiting, he might not have been known – or registered – as Ali Bakhtiyari, but as ‘Ali Asqar, son of Hussein’, as is the custom in Afghanistan and elsewhere in the region…” (Corlett 2005, p. 26)

Skelton told Corlett that he “does not claim that he got to the bottom of the story” but was convinced that he “went to all the places that Ali and, it seems, more importantly, his supporters, said he should go to.” (Corlett 2005, p. 27) Robert Manne writes in the foreword to *Following them Home*: “It is an interesting fact that while the editors of *The Age* and *The Australian* commissioned journalists to travel to Afghanistan to check on the bona fides of one famous asylum seeker, Ali Bakhtiyari, not one journalist from the mainstream media seems to have reported on a question of far greater human importance – the fate of Australia’s Middle Eastern and Central Asian returnees (Corlett 2005 pp. V11 –v111).

On another occasion, the perceived public interest is cited regardless of concern for the individual. Corlett writes that the late author Bob Ellis visited Woomera in 2002 with solicitor Jeremy Moore, founder of the Woomera Legal Group, “as a paralegal”. “Ellis recorded an interview with the Bakhtiyari boys. They requested he not publish what they said. Ellis immediately released their statement in the form of an article in *The Canberra Times* with these concluding words from himself: “I am releasing this transcript of things
said by the Bakhtiyari boys against their wishes...because I believe more harm will come to them and others if I do not.” It is a statement, Corlett writes, that is a clear violation of trust. “With friends of this sort, one cannot help but wonder, who needs enemies?” (Corlett 2005, pp. 24-5).

In her book, Blind Conscience, ABC TV journalist Margot O’Neill cites a front-page story in Sydney’s Daily Telegraph alleging that detainees enjoy hotel-standard accommodation in most detention centres. “Five star asylums,” said the headline. (O’Neill 2008 p. 161). The Daily Telegraph article by journalist David Penberthy, who went on to edit the paper, claimed that asylum seekers enjoyed DVDs, pay TV, yoga classes, flower arranging and driver education, mini swimming pools for children, electric guitars and hair dressing. “The story comes straight from the immigration department’s website,” O’Neill writes. Penberthy later agreed to accompany an activist to Sydney’s Villawood detention centre. A year after his first article, Penberthy wrote a series of articles detailing the plight of detainees. “Terms such as “queue jumper’ do not do this bloke any justice,” he wrote. “They are also factually wrong...” (O’Neill 2008, p. 162)

David Marr and Marian Wilkinson deal with the media’s role extensively in their book, Dark Victory (Allen and Unwin, 2003). The veteran journalists noted “extraordinary steps” (Marr and Wilkinson 2003, p. 178) to which the government went to keep Operation Relex, the defence force border protection operation initiated after the September 2001 Tampa affair from the public. The policy was designed to ensure “no surprises for the minister’s office”. Marr and Wilkinson write: “… Some military men candidly called this what it was: censorship. But journalists in the Canberra press gallery were so used to the Howard government’s obsession with controlling information, that the new instruction aroused little comment. It was 10 days before the first journalist – Ian McPhedran, defence writer for News Limited – reported these extraordinary restrictions. He was joined by a handful of perceptive journalists but the government’s tight hold over military information did not become a matter of general public concern. There were no editorials thundering against political censorship, no evidence of proprietors complaining to the government, no protests from the Canberra press gallery. This very significant failure by the press allowed Reith to impose tighter rules for Relex three weeks later....” (Marr and Wilkinson 2003, p.179)
While Marr and Wilkinson do not single out the Canberra press gallery alone in their criticism, it has long seemed to me, as a Melbourne-based journalist, that those of us operating from outside the national capital and not as dependent, if at all, on government sources could more freely seek out stories without fear of upsetting government sources. I would regularly telephone Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock’s media officer for comment on the assertions in a story I was writing. But I would do so for the sake of balance, only after I had completed interviews and gathered material. It did not matter to me that the media officer sought, as it seemed then, to discourage me from proceeding by telling me this was “not new “or newsworthy.

(It is worth noting, however, that those of us not dependent on government sources were inevitably beholden to other sources including activists and community representatives and therefore also constrained by the need to maintain confidence and goodwill.

It was in a time of perceived media acquiescence that a small group of activists and asylum seekers devised a strategy outlined in A Knock at the Door that challenged government “spin” by telling stories that undermined official attempts to marginalise and vilify.

Wrestling with the authorial voice

As a working journalist since the early 1980s, I had for some time regarded my primary role as a storyteller as much as news reporter. For reasons outlined earlier in this exegesis, I had for some time pursued stories about marginalised people. This became a central preoccupation while reporting on asylum seekers in the early-to-mid-2000s. I was gathering stories and reporting with a strong sense of purpose. I thought it was a story that needed to be told. I believed then that the reportage could make a difference.

In this chapter, I seek to further explain why the use of personal reflection in a book revisiting a 730-word newspaper story about rehearsals for a theatre production (The Sunday Age, July 14, 2002, page 3) and subsequent reports I wrote featuring some of those involved, will help fill a gap in scholarly inquiry that has highlighted the failure of media coverage of asylum seekers in the Howard era.

Here, my focus is largely with the use of a personal reflection and the reasons I have sought to tell the story of the theatre production through a particular journalistic (and migrant)
This approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of practice and process than might have been possible through semi-structured interviews with peers and analysis of media coverage which I had considered at one stage in the PhD journey. I drew on personal experience as a migrant and as a journalist who reported extensively on migrants and refugees for nearly three decades, including the arrival of asylum seekers in the early 2000s. The book enabled me to interrogate my own influences and motivations as well as the ideals for the profession.

The Media Alliance Code of Ethics tells us that the role of journalism is to “inform citizens and animate democracy”.

New York journalism academic, Jay Rosen, has written of a plaque installed at the National Press Club in Washington on its 50th anniversary in 1958 that said in part that “the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of their responsibility, trustees of the public; that acceptance of a lesser service than a public service is a betrayal of that trust” (Rosen 1999, p.1). Rosen goes on to caution that though most journalists he knows consider themselves to be “serious people serving the public good”, like most other professionals, they “often misunderstand themselves and their work, and it is not necessary to accept these blind spots in order to accept the press and its commitment to doing good” (Rosen 1999, pp.1-2). “On the contrary,” he writes, “to argue with journalists is one way of honouring their public commitments, for it assumes that they are indeed public – not the exclusive property of a profession keeping counsel with itself” (Rosen 1999, p.2). The criticism in the academic domain of journalistic practice in the early 2000s is valuable. However, it might have been more so had it included the voices of practitioners and, in engaging with journalists, alerted them/us to “these blind spots”.

Like the players in Kan Yama Kan and others involved in the production including the writers, musicians and the director, I was convinced that by telling simple stories about people I could somehow engage with readers who might realise that the people I wrote about were not so unlike the rest of us. An editor once told me that the strength of the newspaper story – where it was placed and how much interest it generated – depended on what was “at stake”.

When I first reported on people who had come here by boat and their stories of brutality, hazardous journey and trauma of detention as well as the uncertainty on temporary visas, I
could not imagine stories with more at stake. It took a while to realise that the interest depended on what was at stake not to vulnerable outsiders but to readers as consumers who might attract advertisers. I came to understand that the real challenge was to write in such a way that the latter (readers) so identified with the former (vulnerable outsiders) that they came to see that though they might be relatively secure, much was at stake to them too. To pursue this approach, I needed to believe somehow in the goodwill in the Australian community. *A Knock at the Door* begins and ends with Michael, a man who has endured much but does not lose a faith in the people in the country in which he has sought refuge. Though I did not quite share his confidence, I have held to a commitment to the possibility of working for social cohesion through journalism.

As I will show later in this chapter, there were times when I questioned this notion and thought I might be acting inappropriately. I mostly refrained from writing opinion pieces for fear that it would undermine readers’ confidence in my reportage by revealing a bias. I knew there was no possible objectivity but decided readers might wonder at the fairness and accuracy of the news and feature reports if I declared my opinions too overtly.

As a journalism lecturer, one of the first things we teach students is to keep out of a news report. Your opinion might help shape the way you structure the story. But it has no place in a news report or, to some degree, a feature article. We tell students to cite and/or quote but resist the temptation to comment. We don’t suggest they refrain from personal comment elsewhere in their writing. But after years in the industry, the practice can influence your writing detrimentally. In the apartheid-era memoir, *The Wild Almond Line*, I had to overcome a temptation to hold back. In *A Knock at the Door* I weave accounts by various characters. They tell their stories. Later, they are given copies of their quotes in context to correct. As a journalist relating their stories, it was tempting to refrain from intrusion. Was it appropriate to focus on my own perspective intermittently or was I merely getting in the way?

My reading on autoethnography helped in this regard. “Even though the researcher's experience isn’t the main focus, personal reflection adds context and layers to the story being told about participants (Ellis, 2004),” Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner wrote (2011).
Another early lesson to journalism students is to include various and contradictory voices/perspectives in a news report. For much of the time I worked on the artefact I was troubled by the absence of at least one voice to clearly articulate the rationale behind the asylum seeker policies of the time. In Chapter Twenty, then Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone counters Bob Brown’s assertion in the Senate one evening in November 2003 that she might have “understood those who had endured ‘enormous stress and difficulty with heart-rending stories to tell’” had she attended a media presentation by the *Kan Yama Kan* players and others in Parliament earlier that day. After she indicated in her response to my July 2014 email that she had no recollection of the meeting between her and *Kan Yama Kan* Refugees Say Thank You members, I was tempted to draw on her extensive comment elsewhere on the issue and have not ruled this out featuring it in the book.

Who better to defend government policy than the responsible government minister? In *Blind Conscience*, ABC journalist Margot O’Neill features a lengthy interview with Vanstone’s predecessor Philip Ruddock that included the following exchange:

O’Neill: “Looking back at your quotes about the people there was never anything positive about them. In fact at times it sounded quite derogatory.”

Ruddock: “Did it, how?”

O’Neill: “You said they were liars, manipulative, illegals, rich demanding people who asked for shampoo, some of them even had mobile phones, well most Australians don’t have mobile phones how dare they have mobile phones.”

Ruddock: “Do you think I should have stood there and said ‘These are the most deserving people in the world and we think that they should get on boats and just turn up regardless.’ You see I mean for me I think people who have a need for assistance should get it.” (O’Neill 2008, p.216)

If the artefact was extended reportage on the treatment of asylum seekers at the time, Ruddock’s voice (and Vanstone’s) would have been essential. But such is the nature of a book, the voices that might otherwise by primary are less secondary, at best.
The narrator’s voice and role in the artefact’s structure

As discussed earlier, In Writing for Story, Jon Franklin identified a fairly common notion of story as “a sequence of actions that occur when a sympathetic character encounters a complicating situation that he (/she) confronts and solves” (Franklin 1994, p.71); in the best of which “the odyssey from complication to resolution changes the character profoundly” (Franklin 1994, p.89)

Among others whose work I consulted while writing the artefact, Martha Alderson wrote: “The protagonist of a story is the character most changed by the dramatic action.” (Alderson 2011, p.75) A central figure in A Knock at the Door, Michael Aboujundi, does not appear to be changed significantly. Then again, perhaps he is in the sense that mythologist Joseph Campbell once said: “It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life. Where you stumble, there lies your treasure.” (Osborn 1991, p 24) As I show in this chapter, he went down deep and emerged with an inspiring faith in others. In the last paragraphs of A Knock at the Door, I feature an exchange with Michael Aboujundi. “Never,” Michael Aboujundi replied when asked if anything you have experienced has shaken your confidence in the Australian people. “Never. Never. Three times, with a capital ‘N’.” His is the story of determination – keeping the faith despite the odds – rather than changed insight.

At one stage in the writing, it seemed to me that the narrative might have been stronger if one of the activists had come to activism from a contrary position; someone who had had a Damascus Road experience. This I later realised was not necessarily the case. What I was working on was a narrative that consisted of a collage of stories of odysseys - stories of the trials and tribulations of protagonists with no single point of view.

Elsewhere, non-fiction writers have created composite characters to articulate aspects otherwise missing in narratives. But this seemed problematic to me, potentially undermining the integrity of reportage.

It occurred to me that mine might be the detached voice and that I might have been the one to have experienced a significant change. When signing one of his books for me (at my request), Arnold Zable described me as a “kindred spirit”. It occurred to me that as a journalist I invariably stood apart, even when I stood in a circle at Arif’s housewarming in Chapter Twenty Four. I was the observer. I would record this event in the book. I realised

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late in the writing that in showing my own distance as a journalist I somehow provided a contrary voice. But in order to do so, I had to make that distance significant. I am not certain that I have succeeded in this.

**My role as journalist in the context of activism**

Michael Gordon, one of more than 20 Age journalists I interviewed a few years before I left the publication for a proposed book about the “stories behind stories” they had written, spoke of a report he wrote after gaining access to asylum-seekers held in Nauru under the Howard Government’s Pacific Solution. After knockbacks from Nauru and Australian authorities Gordon was finally able to visit the island. He made contact with one of the men outside the camp and arranged to interview more than 50 others, many of whom were later found to be legitimate refugees and settled in Australia. (Gordon, M. “This home is where the broken heart is”. *The Age* April 16, 2005).

“Look, I don’t see it as crusading or advocacy journalism,” he told me. “It was an important story that needed to be told and the fact that until then it was made very difficult for journalists to be able to tell that story...meant that it was even more important that you make an effort to tell it.”

I must concede in hindsight that whether I articulated it that way or not, I wondered at times if I was not engaging in what Gordon, a journalist I much admire, referred to above as “crusading or advocacy journalism”.

“It’s getting to a point where there is advocacy parading as journalism that is actually deleterious to a sensible discussion about these matters,” Department of Immigration and Border Protection secretary Michael Pezzullo reportedly told a Senate hearing years later, in February 2016, after the ABC incorrectly reported that a five year-old boy was raped on Nauru.

Advocacy parading as journalism? Having chosen to at all possible times to highlight the plight of asylum seekers in the early 2000s, I strongly suspected I was at risk of blurring the line between activist and reporter. I can recall wondering about compromise while covering a protest march from State Parliament at which I crossed the line to join the marchers. Was I gaining insight or forsaking my role as observer to become a biased participant? I’m not
suggesting that you have to be a “biased participant” in order to humanise the outsider. On the contrary, any fair and balanced report will inevitably make the stranger less strange to the reader and strengthen our sense of the humanity of the outsider.

As Temporary Protection Visa holders emerged from detention and were available for interview in a way in which they could not be accessed while in captivity, their stories inevitably found their way into the media. As noted earlier, in his preface to the second edition in 2002 of the book, Borderline, Peter Mares suggests the media coverage evolved since its publication in 2001 and many journalists were by then “working tenaciously to ferret out hidden facts and document personal stories”. (Mares 2002, p.x11)

Some years later, reflecting on the type of stories to which I was drawn in decades as a journalist, I concluded that though I had been a generalist mostly without a specific “round”, mine was “the bleeding heart beat”. Not so confident in the early 2000s, I asked a colleague I respected to pull me in line if I succumbed to the temptation to activism. You only ever cross the line to activism, he reassured me, if you pursue stories for reasons of conviction alone. What I was doing, he told me, was entirely legitimate because these were valid stories in the public interest.

Years on, I would wonder at an assertion by barrister Julian Burnside quoted earlier and in the artefact that “the silence of the press will be seen as part of our national disgrace.” (Burnside 2007, p.82)

There were striking examples that suggested a strong contrary view in the media. Then a contributing editor to The Courier Mail, David Solomon edited a book featuring a series of articles examining Howard’s success in the seemingly “unwinnable” 2001 Federal election. In a chapter entitled Manipulating the Media, he writes that The Age alone supported the ALP before the 2001 election. “Mr Howard has asked The Australian people to re-elect his government on the basis of his stand on asylum seekers,” the Melbourne broadsheet told its readers. “He has asked them to re-elect his government on the basis that he has shown true leadership on this issue. We believe the opposite is true: he has shown no leadership on this crucial issue. He has pandered to fear. He does not deserve the support of The Australian people.” (Solomon 2002, p.233)
Solomon does note that *The Age* was the only publication to take this position then. But it was a significant voice and, significantly, at a time when I was working for *The Age*’s sister newspaper, *The Sunday Age*, it meant that I was not so out of step as I might have thought.

My personal experience in the newsroom was mixed. The interest in the issue depended on timing, availability of staff, competing stories, editorial space and what I took to be a determination not to be seen to be partisan. I felt enough disquiet to make this the key focus of a PhD but it was not until I encountered substantial scholarly research highlighting the shortcomings of much of media coverage.

**Theoretical interpretations of media coverage and responsibilities**

While researching the issue, I first encountered theories that caused me to reflect on my own assumptions on the media’s role in society and the extent to which it did, and did not, hold authorities to account.

We live in a liberal democratic society where the press is sometimes regarded as a watchdog on governments and protector of citizens against excesses in the “Fourth Estate’ argument “based on John Stuart Mill’s observation of a capacity of the press to be a bulwark against 'tyrannical governments’”. (Economou and Tanner 2008, p.2). It is a notion that persists despite critiques that “the press ceased to be seen as political actors operating on behalf of the citizenry in the name of a decentralisation of governmental power. Rather, the press now become viewed as consisting of self-interested actors seeking to maximise their economic position at the expense of other sectoral actors, or as quasi-institutionalised players acting in collusion with the state - a reversal of the important assumptions underpinning the fourth estate model." (Economou and Tanner 2008, page 34)

The Fourth Estate model "assumes that the press will make a positive contribution to the democratic debate by ensuring the flow of information from the centres of decision-making to the citizenry, and by allowing debate to occur." (Economou and Tanner 2008, p.7). But theorists have questioned its appropriateness.

The early 20th century Austrian economist and political scientist, Joseph Schumpeter, suggested that the media was part of a “democratic elite” that included politicians. “Like those members of the democratic elite who they report on, the press have a full-time
interest as well as participation in the affairs of state. This means the press actually emerge
as being closer to the institutions of governance than to the citizenry...." (Economou and
Tanner 2008, p.17).

German social theorist Jurgen Habermas was concerned at the emphasis on entertainment
and, like some predecessors from the Frankfurt School of critical social theory thought the
mass media “could undermine, rather than enhance, the quality of the public discourse on
society and politics” (Economou and Tanner 2008, p.29). Some saw parallels between the
media in liberal and totalitarian states. Fugitives from Nazi German, prominent Frankfurt
School members Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who attributed the emergence of
fascism to the media, challenged preconceptions on its role in the US.

Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937) put forward a theory of hegemony – the
assertion of dominance and power by one group over others – in which he insisted the mass
media was using elites to perpetuate their power, wealth, status, philosophy, culture and
morality. (Lull 2000, p.49).

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, co-authors of Manufacturing Consent (1988),
suggested the news is shaped in a way that is comparable to propaganda if in a more subtle
way than in a totalitarian system. “Leaders of the media claimed that the news choices rest
on unbiased professional and objective criteria, and they have support for this contention in
the intellectual community,” Herman and Chomsky wrote in the preface to their book which
is subtitled The Political Economy of the Mass Media. “If, however, the powerful are able to
fix the premises of the discourse, to decide what the general populace is allowed to see,
hear and think about, and to ‘manage’ public opinion by regular propaganda campaigns, the
standard view of how the system works is at serious odds with the reality.” (Herman and
Chomsky 1994 edition, p.i)

**Autobiographical underpinnings: journalism**

In A Knock at the Door, I sought to explore the extent to which my approach was influenced
by my background. I left South Africa at the start of my journalism career. I have described
my journalism studies and reporting experience in that country in The Wild Almond Line
(2000). During a brief stint at an afternoon newspaper in Cape Town while studying an
honours degree in journalism in the late 1970s, I was required to rewrite a report I submitted after a trip to a hospital and farmland in the Western Cape. Black farm labourers hospitalised with burn wounds told me their white foreman deliberately led them into the flames. I assumed that I was acting properly by seeking out the foreman’s comment. I never did find out the consequence for the labourers of speaking out to a reporter for a story I was required to rewrite with a senior journalist omitting the labourers’ claims of which the foreman may have been unaware had I not sought his comment. Perhaps the editors were justified in not entrusting so sensitive and legally problematic a story to a young would-be reporter doing a stint with them as part of a journalism degree.

In Chapter Eight, I quote an October 1986 interview in Sydney, nearly five years after I migrated, with a former Rand Daily Mail editor. Allister Sparks cited reasons why few white South Africans would have witnessed the rioting in black areas which had caused the death of 2500 people in recent months and detention without trial of 20,000. (The Sydney Morning Herald, October 18 1986, p.24). The media did little to help make them aware, he said, blaming "draconian laws" which had gagged the press since a state of emergency was declared earlier that year and a weakening of the resolve of a once vigorous press to cover the unrest. He said that the demise of The Rand Daily Mail early the previous year - its closure followed a failed attempt to turn about this editorial policy of encouraging black readership - had a big impact on journalism in South Africa. Journalists were all the more cautious. Few were willing to take the risks then necessary to cover events properly.

In their book, Narrating the Crisis - Hegemony and the South African Press, co-editors Keyan and Ruth Tomaselli and Johan Muller explore the impact of ideology on journalists in the apartheid-era. They cite a claim by the German born American sociologist, Herbert Gans, author of a late 1970s study of the sociology of the news, Deciding What’s News (Northwestern University Press 1979), that journalists tend to identify ideology with allegiances at the extreme ends of the political spectrum. (Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller, p.22)

“Journalists, in their professional claims to neutrality or objectivity, locate themselves within a particular ideology. They are not necessarily aware of this ideology nor of how it is forming in shaping their position in the world. They are able to recognise ideology in others
to the right and left of themselves in the political spectrum only because it differs from their own.

“Certain kinds of reality are singled out, selected from the continually ongoing process of social experience, highlighted and made more important than the mundane social processes within which they repose. The event is then re-presented and sold as ‘news’ to a consumer public. News in this way becomes a commodity.” (Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller 1987, p.24)

The editors of *Narrating the Crisis - Hegemony and the South African Press*, wrote that journalists who questioned the dominant discourse “found that they were deprived of the support mechanisms which would otherwise be available to them”. (Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller 1987, p.28)

They wrote that this was “the firm’s method of restriction and shielding” and quoted a September 1982 interview with an experienced Cape Town journalist who said: “I find it very difficult to get a photographer for a lot of contentious stories. Let’s take, for example, a riot in the townships. The editor is very conservative. He believes that publicity adds fuel to the riots. There have been times when I have actually had to use my own car and my own camera to cover these events. That’s on the photographic side. On the newsdesk, I might put in a story which is the point of view which would rub up the conservative guy on the newsdesk. I would find that he would sit on it, and it wouldn’t get past him and would, in fact, miss the deadline...” (Tomaselli, Tomaselli and Muller 1987, p. 29)

On occasion, it seemed to me that I was discouraged from suggesting asylum seeker-related story proposals to weekly news conferences, on other occasions actively encouraged. This might have been because we were a small team covering diverse issues under pressure. I might have been single-minded in pursuit of a single issue where I was required to be available to report the news of the day.

Then again, this was a time of insecurity in the print media, particularly so among the Fairfax broadsheets which were losing revenue from classified advertising with the emergence of online sites and determined to retain a readership on whose loyalty its future depended. The judgement on the worth of the story and its prominence depended on perception of what was at stake to our readership. I suspect that some editors would be more wary of
running stories that antagonised readers than authorities. Some might have perceived indifference in the community towards asylum seekers. Others clearly saw public interest. “As an industry the news media is unequivocally commercial and guided by the principles which may be at odds with the independent political purpose of the Fourth Estate rhetoric,” Julianne Schultz has written. (Schultz 1998, p.16)

Articulating historic context in the artefact

If sociologist Herbert Gans was correct in suggesting (Tomaselli and Tomaselli and Muller 1987, p.22) that unlike sociologists or historians, journalists regard reality as “a set of disparate and independent events, each of which is new and can therefore be reported as news”, this tendency would in itself make for a shallow journalism that failed to give insight on historic context. In the artefact, I have deliberately sought to give the reader a sense of historic context. There is a risk here in introducing material that might seem of marginal relevance to the narrative. For instance, I feature an account of Egon Erwin Kisch, the Prague-born socialist coincidentally nick-named the “jumper” after leaping more than five metres from the SS Strathaird at Station Pier on November 13, 1934, to defy a ban on entering Australia. As noted in the artefact, Dr Heidi Zogbaum, author of Kisch in Australia. The Untold Story (Scribe 2004) told me that “in many ways, Kisch was the first boat person”.

Andrew Markus has written that the Sydney and Melbourne press in the mid-1850s reflected strong opposition to Chinese migration, fears that they might “swamp the Anglo-Saxon population”, citing an April 11 1855 report in The Age that spoke of an “invading army” and quoted concerns expressed by the Gold-Fields Commissioners “that a comparative handful of colonists may be buried in a countless throng of Chinese” (Markus 1979, p.23). Naomi and Peter White noted that prejudice against Asians has its roots in the 1850s, when the number of Chinese in Australia rose from 2000 in 1854 to 17,000 in 1855. The sudden increase in the number of Chinese, their high visibility on the goldfields, and the competitive search for gold, “resulted in them being perceived as a threat to Australia’s material and cultural standards”. (White and White 1983, p.39). The negative attitudes would lead to an early 1900s prohibition of non-Caucasian labour. The White Australia policy would remain until the early 1970s.
In recent decades, the focus of anxiety has shifted from Asians to Muslims. In their analysis of government and media representation of unsolicited migrants in Spain and Australia in recent years, Michael Leach and Anna Zamora note that both nations have deep-seated historical fears of invasion and occupation “capable of resonating with contemporary fears of terrorism, and the broader resurgence of ‘Islamophobia’” (Leach and Zamora 2006, p.53).

They write that while tragic events associated with Islamic fundamentalism have “touched” both, these concerns predate attacks in Bali and Madrid. There are other influences on these attitudes including widely reported speculations of the Islamic ‘Imperia’, fuelled in Spain by reported comment by Bin Laden on Al-Andalus, regarded by Islamists as a halcyon age of Muslim power and artistic achievement and, in Australia, the Jemaah Islamiyah’s stated aim to create an Islamic ‘superstate’ or caliphate which would include parts of northern Australia.

Leach and Zamora argue that despite some obvious differences, they found “remarkable similarities in the development of national ‘border protection’ discourses in an age of globalisation.” (Leach and Zamora 2006, p.51) They write that border protection discourse is emerging in mid-level Western states as a symbolic substitute for the ‘old nation’ which regulated a national economy and minimised social and economic ‘risk’ for its citizens. “In an age of increasing transnational mobility, the public representation of forced (Australia) or economic migrants (Spain) tests the limits of globalisation ideology, as the exclusion of certain others from modes of transnational mobility becomes central to maintaining popular conceptions of national ‘borders’.” (Leach and Zamora 2006, p.51)

They write that the decline of the economically protectionist policies has seen insecurity and risk become increasingly prominent themes in Western societies and a “near universal contrast between a neoliberal globalist discourse of ‘openness’ and ‘reform’, and the rise of national vernacular discourses about ‘globalisation’, which are typically concerned with how to protect cultural and economic autonomy, and often explicitly exclusionist” (Leach and Zamora 2006, p.52). Leach and Zamora cite Zygmunt Bauman, the Polish-born sociology academic based in England since the early 1970s, who has written of “the production of ‘human waste’; populations unwanted by global capitalism, and blocked by nation states to which they seek entry”. (Leach and Zamora 2006, p.52)
They write that refugees and economic migrants are uniquely suited as scapegoats for popular uncertainties, enabling their respective governments to reassure their populace that they have some measure of control.

Well over a decade after the Howard Government refused to allow a Norwegian freighter and the 438 Afghans rescued from a distressed fishing vessel to enter Australian waters, some refer to the November 2001 poll as “Tampa election” (Rodd 2007, p.35). But who remembers the Song Be? The August 2001 Tampa controversy would have reminded some observers of a somewhat similar incident almost a quarter of a century earlier - the arrival in Darwin of a fishing boat transporting 181 Vietnamese refugees a week before the 1977 election.

Chelsea Piper Rodd has written that the Vietnamese boat, Song Be, encountered a similar response to the “extensive media attention, public emotion and political energies Australia invested in the Tampa” (Rodd 2007, p.35). But though news of the Vietnamese boat deepened divisions in a polarised community, Rodd writes that the Vietnamese seeking asylum here at the time “became what political analysts term a political ‘non-issue’ in the 1977 election”.

"But this is not to say that the press ignored these refugees," Rodd writes. "To the contrary, throughout November 1977, preceding the election, as boats arrived in quick succession, newspapers around the country filled their pages with stories announcing the arrival of the ‘boat people’. Though the stories of these boats are, in many ways, remarkably similar, ultimately the outcomes for the people most significant to the tales - the refugees themselves - were vastly different."

A comparison of the media response to refugees in the 1970s and 2000s reveals a reversal of sorts. In a sense we have an inversion – the Left opposing the earlier refugees, the Right the latter. The Fraser government welcomed the Vietnamese despite resistance from the Labor opposition and the trade union movement. In the latter period, it was a Coalition (Howard) government that took tough measures to stop the Afghan, Iraqi, Iranian and other refugees.
This inversion, however, does little to allay my concerns about the underlying electoral appeal of a hard line approach towards asylum seekers or the readiness with which we were able to accept such a term as queue jumpers.

In their paper on government and media stereotyping in the early 2000s, Leach and Mansouri note that “despite the absence of any real 'queue' in receiving countries such as Pakistan, Iran and Indonesia, this language has been effective in depicting asylum seekers as a deviant group unworthy of protection.” (Leach and Mansouri 2003).

What then did asylum seekers themselves make of media coverage in the Howard era? Leach and Mansouri feature extracts from interviews with temporary protection visa (TPV) holders living in Melbourne. One of the men quoted says that while watching Channel Seven news reportage in the detention centre in which they had been held, he and others felt the media was on their side. But as the authors note, others had a less flattering view of The Australian media. Another worried that asylum seekers were being depicted as “killers, criminals, illegal and disrespectful to others”.

Reading this led me to reflect on asylum seekers I had encountered as a journalist covering the issue at the time and appreciate the candour of those who might have had good reason for caution.
Chapter Six: Theatre activism as counter-narrative

As I have indicated in the artefact, though I had learned much from activist theatre in South Africa before my migration in my mid-20s, I have no special interest in theatre in Australia. But I was interested in revisiting stories I had written related to Kan Yama Kan – an initial report on the rehearsal and subsequent articles on the players as well as on activism at Fitzroy Learning Network – as a way of exploring the way in which a small group of asylum seekers and their supporters had in effect set out to do onstage what scholarly research overwhelmingly suggests journalists have failed to do on the page – tell stories about people who had suffered and were seeking refuge among us. I did not set out to examine the stories to explore the extent to which they confirmed or disconfirmed the academic perception of journalistic failure. This might have been the case had the players told stories onstage the media had refused to tell. This was not the case. I was not alone in reporting some of the stories. What interested me was the way in which Kan Yama Kan became a focus for activism and part of the media strategy to communicate with politicians and public in a period in which it seems the role of journalists was undermined by authorities. In a sense, I was revisiting the stories by elaborating on them to deepen an understanding of practice and process and to provide a fuller understanding than one can gain from scholarly research so far.

An ESL teacher who initiated the theatre project and its predecessor, Without My Mother’s Hand, introduced me to the theoretical writings of Augusto Boal and, with his work as a primary focus, I was able to consider the extent to which theatre in both Australia and South Africa was used as a force for political change. This may seem to be a different unit of analysis for research than journalistic practice. But the effectiveness of theatre as a counter-narrative at a time of compromised media would seem to be essential to this study.

Why a theatrical production

In this chapter, I consider some tentative parallels between theatre and journalism with particular reference to the theory and practice of Brazilian Augusto Boal. At this point though, it is worth noting its appeal as a forum that enabled marginalised people to
communicate to the wider community, even if not the mainstream. Michael Aboujundi told me at one point that his dream was not just to take the play to Canberra but to the Sydney Opera House. Such was his confidence in the likely impact of telling (true) stories, he wanted it to be seen by as many Australians as possible so that they might more clearly understand the predicament of those who had come here seeking refuge. *Kan Yama Kan* might not have succeeded as conventional theatre – the reviews I cited in the book by theatre critics at *The Age* and *The Australian* make that clear – but I was never interested in it as conventional theatre.

I’ve touched very briefly in the artefact on the role of the organisation, Actors for Refugees, in the Howard era and alluded to other productions that articulated similar concerns to the one on which I have focused in the artefact, *A Knock at the Door*. But it was not until fairly late in my research that I found a paper that seemed to provide a missing piece in the jigsaw – a useful overview of the theatre activism and the extent to which it articulated stories about asylum seekers the Howard government sought to prevent the media from conveying. Though *Kan Yama Kan* rates only a brief mention in the article by theatre academic Dr Rand Hazou - and only one performance, at Victorian Trades Hall on 19 July 2002, is noted - I was at last able to see it in context.

Hazou (2010) writes in an online publication that in a three-year period to 2005 as many as 32 separate plays and performances were staged in Australia “engaging with the plight of asylum seekers arriving on Australian shores”. Hazou bookends the period with performances by the French company, Theatre du Soleil, which in January 2002 threatened to pull out of the Sydney Festival in response to the Howard government’s handling of the Tampa affair and treatment of asylum seekers and returned in October 2005 with a production based on 100 hours of interviews with detainees. It sparked controversy in January 2002 by projecting the slogan “free the refugee” on a screen on the closing night of its production, *The Flood Drummers*. After several complaints, Sydney Festival director, Brett Sheehy, wrote in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Sheehy, 2002, p.13) that “it has always been a role of the arts to keep vigilant, to diagnose our social illnesses, and to sound the occasional clarion call for insomnia in the face of apathy”.

Hazou writes that Theatre du Soleil director, Ariane Mnouchkine, almost a year later told *The Sydney Morning Herald* (Clark, James, 2003, p.14) that the display of the slogan on a
screen one night in January 2002 was “a good gesture, but I think it was an easy gesture. So I think we owe the Australian public to come back with our work on this subject”.

When Theatre du Soleil staged *Le Dernier (The Last) Caravanserail* at the Melbourne International Arts Festival in late 2005, it drew on interviews conducted in detention centres by Mnouchkine, who had extended her stay in 2002 to visit and interview detainees in Sydney’s Villawood centre and other asylum seekers in New Zealand, Indonesia and France. “By the time Theatre du Soleil returned to Australia in October 2005 to stage *Le Dernier Caravanserail* at the Melbourne International Arts Festival, the public mood on the issue of asylum in detention had shifted considerably,” Hazou writes. “The sell-out production not only received a rapturous response from audiences, but, in response to the popularity of the production, the Victorian Government provided unprecedented funding to extend the season of a production that was explicitly critical of the Howard government’s treatment of asylum seekers”.

He writes of a perceived shift in public attitudes towards asylum seekers “during a period of intense creativity and political engagement in the Australian theatre landscape”. “And while it is difficult to directly correlate the change in public attitudes to the amount of theatre activity circulating at this time, the sheer quantity of the theatre output emerging during this period constitutes a crucial factor in understanding the shift in the public sympathy towards asylum seekers.” Hazou seems to imply that the number of theatrical productions dealing with asylum seekers was one measure by which we could quantify a shift in public sympathy. However, it is also possible that they were performed to niche audiences and did not reflect a broader change in attitudes.

Hazou writes that the Australian theatre response to the treatment of asylum seekers “must be understood in the context of the government’s policies of exclusion and censorship of the media”. “When government impedes popular media sources of news, current affairs and reportage, the stage is imbued with political significance through its potential capacity to disseminate information and expose the manipulations, machinations and obfuscations of the state. Challenging the government’s policies of exclusion, Australian theatre emerged as an important socio—political practice geared towards the inclusion of those who have been excluded by the state. In contrast to the government’s policies of media censorship and information control, Australian theatre responding to the plight of asylum seekers has
attempted in various ways to return the theatre to its etymological and radical associations as ‘a place of seeing’ where audiences can contend with the experiences and stories of those hidden and silenced by the state.”

Hazou includes Kan Yama Kan among 32 productions in the 2002-2005 period in an appendix to his paper in which he notes that many were staged several times both interstate and in regional Australia. “Measured simply by the quantity of productions alone, this is an extraordinary output of theatre dealing with a single political issue. What is even more extraordinary is that while the Howard government’s ‘Pacific Solution’ and asylum policies have invited extensive analysis and debate, in the overall commentary by historians and political observers, little attention, if any, has been paid to the significant contribution the Australian theatre has made in response to those hidden behind the razor wire of the nation’s detention centres.”

If this is indeed a gap in the academic literature, it is one which the artefact seeks to fill partly in addition to the gap of journalists’ perspectives on alleged failure in covering asylum seekers in the same period. But it is not the main focus of this study which sets out to provide a particular journalist’s response to a particular theatre production in the hope of ensuring a more complete understanding than is provided by research which has not included the media practitioner’s perspective. This is intended as an adjunct to the existing research and not necessarily as a way of challenging its validity. Nor does it seek to preclude further study to facilitate other journalists’ perspectives.

Hazou writes: “While journalists were constrained from reporting about detention centres and the impact of government policy on asylum seekers, the same restrictions proved to be a compelling provocation that incited theatre makers into action. Responding to the deficit of public information about asylum seekers and detention centres, theatre makers went to extraordinary lengths to visit detention centres, to meet with asylum seekers and detainees, to document and record their stories, and to disseminate their experiences and accounts in performance.”

I should note at this point that I did not feel constrained at all in reporting on Kan Yama Kan and its players other than the fact that work commitments meant I was not at liberty to spend time on the road with the production and regret in hindsight, to have accompanied the show to Canberra.
Theoretical influences

Boal developed his theatre of the oppressed during a lengthy stint as director of the Arena Theatre in Sao Paolo in 15 years to 1971. He left for Argentina after being arrested and tortured by the military dictatorship. Boal “was convinced that the theatre could help to free people from the political, social and economic forces which kept them poor, repressed and unhappy,” Burton wrote (Burton 2001, p.241).

*Kan Yama Kan* challenged the apathy of Australian audiences only to the extent to which it reached the wider community. It succeeded as part of a broader strategy aimed at drawing attention to the issue. It appears to have succeeded too in causing the players themselves to reflect on and articulate their situations in a mostly safe environment despite the inevitable anxiety of appearing onstage.

In this latter sense, it reflects some of the concerns raised by Paulo Freire. You can see this in Aoham’s role as co-writer; the way in which Michael asserted himself in the presentation of the production, as when he took it upon himself to deliver a message on behalf of asylum seekers in detention after the Bali bombing and the way in which the activist writers drew back to make way for increasingly articulate asylum seekers among the players who would have had consider their predicament and ways to best communicate. “It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organised struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves,” the Brazilian educationalist wrote. “This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be praxis... Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated. At all stages of their liberation, the oppressed must see themselves as women and men engaged in the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (Freire 1996, pp.47-8).

Though some characters in the book appear to evolve in this way, it would be wrong to assume that any are necessarily empowered by rejecting traditional culture and religion in favour of mainstream secular society.
Augusto Boal wrote that his book, “attempts to show that all theatre is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theatre is one of them ... In this book I also offer some proof that the theatre is a weapon. A very efficient weapon. For this reason one must fight for it. For this reason the ruling classes strive to take permanent hold of the theatre and utilise it as a tool for domination. In doing so, they change the very concept of what ‘theatre’ is. But the theatre can also be a weapon for liberation. For that, it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms. Change is imperative.” (Boal 2008 edition, p. xxiii)

Kan Yama Kan evolved in response to the particular stories of the players and their ability to articulate despite trauma and the challenge to tell it in a new language.

The denial of language as a theme in the artefact

Supporters based at Fitzroy Learning Network made it possible for us to hear the accounts of a kind described in this book as told by people who were not supposed to learn enough of the language to communicate their distress to us. At least, this is my understanding of the decision to deny them access to federally-funded language classes available to all other refugees and migrants. They spoke out on stage at a time when academic studies suggest strongly that media was weak in its coverage and despite government efforts to prevent or at least discourage access to the language of the people with whom they needed to communicate if they were to survive in this society.

The Italian Holocaust survivor, author Primo Levi, once told interviewers of the importance of a familiarity with language to an outsider. “They were suspicious of everyone, us included,” Levi said of his first contact with Poles after surviving Auschwitz (Toaff, Daniel and Ascarelli, Emanuele 2001, p.214). “We were foreigners after all. They didn’t understand us, we had on a strange uniform, the uniform of forced labour, which terrified them. They didn’t want to talk to us, only a handful took pity and with them we managed to explain a little. It was very important to make ourselves understood. An abyss divides the person who can make himself understood from the person who cannot: one is saved and the other is lost*. The same is true in the Lager: understanding and being understood was of
fundamental importance.... As I see it, of the many causes of ruin in the camps, language was among the worst*” (Toaff, Daniel and Ascarelli, Emanuele 2001, p.214) (*My Italics)
The Afrikaans poet and painter, Breyten Breytenbach, who was jailed in the 1970s after returning to South Africa clandestinely from France, wrote of the disorientation of exile in an early poem in which a limited command of language was a “defect”. He wrote in the poem, Luistervink, the title translated as Eavesdropper in English:
“...you ask me how it is living in exile, friend-
what can I say?
that I’m too young for bitter protest
and too old for wisdom or an acceptance
of my Destiny?
that I am only one of many,
the maladjusted,
the hosts of expatriates, deserters,
citizens of the gaps of darkness
one of the ‘Frenchmen with a speech defect’…”
He wrote there of: ”...a shuffling nameless mass/
of early-ageing revolutionaries,
of poets without language and blind painters…”
(Coetzee 1978, p. 51)
In Australia, more than 250 languages are said to have been spoken before the arrival of the Europeans. According to the Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, a state body set up in 1994 to coordinate language programs, about 40 were spoken in Victoria alone. With “varieties” to some, as many as 500 languages were spoken across Australia. “Before settlement Indigenous individuals were capable of speaking five or more languages,” VACL says in a mission statement on its website, www.vaclang.org.au. “When two people met, they could identify the region each came from by the way they spoke. It was a bit like
travelling across Europe and recognising which country each person comes from by their language.”

I can’t help but think of how daunting it seemed to learn Pitjantjatjara, a language then spoken by about 2500 people across the north-western parts of South Australia and areas of Western Australian and the Northern Territory, when I attended sessions organised by the producers of a show called Ngapartji Ngapartji which was staged at the 2006 Melbourne International Arts Festival. I had enrolled as a journalist in the hope of learning from community members and others teaching the language through online stories, songs, animations and short films to deepen appreciation of the festival production but didn’t make it much past the greeting and response “wai palya?” and response “uwa playa” – “Are you all right?” “Yes I am” - before letting it slip, succumbing to work commitments. Nor did I stop to consider what it might be to have to learn Pitjantjatjara if my survival depended upon it.

That was something of the challenge for some asylum seekers forced to grapple with a language which, as Kan Yama Kan dramaturg Robin Laurie noted, is written in the opposite direction to the one with which they were familiar. We might assume that English is a universal language but some were understandably so unfamiliar with it when they arrived in Melbourne from Woomera and other detention centres, those of us seeking to tell their stories did so through mostly Iraqi and Afghan community members on whom we relied to interpret. This was less problematic with the Iraqi community where most were fugitives from Saddam Hussein’s tyranny. It was a little more complex seeking out the stories of Afghan asylum seekers. I had no understanding whatsoever of the persecution of the Hazara community by the Taliban or that some of the people on whom I was relying to act as intermediaries, most of whom would have fled during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, might be from communities implicated in the persecution.

The Hazaras would have been cautiously welcomed by people who suspected that some were in fact Pakistanis posing as Afghans and might have welcomed the language tests used to discredit some asylum seekers called into question in the book. Some would inevitably have been reluctant to see the chance of family reunions undermined by government insistence that the newcomers would take places of other refugees. With the emergence of advocates and supporters such as those associated with Fitzroy Learning Network,
journalists had often media-savvy middlemen and women with whom to negotiate stories. As we see in the book, some activists were cautious in their dealings with the media. But Anne Horrigan-Dixon, for one, acted as facilitator, initiating stories and follow ups. While much has been made of the reliance of media in Canberra on authorities, as discussed earlier, it would be interesting to know the extent to which journalists based elsewhere came to be reliant on activists for their stories.

I’m not suggesting anything sinister or necessarily untoward in this. We might contend, for instance, that they helped assert fairness and balance and the necessary counter to the propaganda. Certainly this was the case in the Refugees Say Thank You Australia initiative described in the artefact. My comment here is not intended as a slight on the efforts of those who cultivated the media. But I believe that more work on their influence on coverage would be valuable.

At a time when detainees sewed their lips together as they fasted in protest at their captivity, it seemed a comment, intended or not, on the enforced silence.

The determination to learn English is evident in the book, not just in the knock at the door at Fitzroy by a young man who is said to have framed his request for language classes in the negative, assuming he would be rejected, but in the valiant efforts of another, Ahmad Raza, seeking to learn from a dictionary in Woomera, one letter of the alphabet at a time. In changing his name from Usama, Michael not only distanced himself from the notorious Osama bin Laden but chose a name of someone who had helped him learn to speak English. So much did he value a command of the language after his release from detention, he traded cigarettes for words.

English language teacher Carmel Davies, whose interest in Boal inspired her theatre work, remembered the impact of newspaper and other material on Hmong women who had struggled to learn English. The classes were a challenge. Then she took a newspaper to class the day after a large proportion of the audience turned their backs on then Prime Minister John Howard as he spoke at a May 1997 reconciliation convention in Melbourne. “When I went into the classroom in Fitzroy, I showed them the photograph and I said, ‘This is the Prime Minister; these are the Aboriginal people’,” Davies recalled. “I had a picture of the 60,000 year timeline, a picture of land. Suddenly, the air was electric.” “That was what happened to us,” Davies remembered the response. “We lost our land. We were chased out
of Thailand. We lived in camps. We had to swim across rivers.” The language teacher could not have expected this flurry of English. “An avalanche of language came out as they related to this story. Suddenly there was a need to speak and the language came. Verbs. Nouns. It wasn’t connected, but it came. It was something that they connected to really strongly.”

She’d been a key figure in the two plays, Without My Mother’s Hand and Kan Yama Kan, in which the use of language evolved to the point where asylum seekers were able to persuasively put their case to the Immigration Minister and others, including journalists.

In Kan Yama Kan, Alice Garner and Majid Shokor took on roles that might remind some of the master of ceremonies character Boal referred to as “the joker”, who introduced the play, explained it and engaged with both players and audience.

Among his methods, Boal devised one he termed Newspaper Theatre.

“It was initially developed by the Nucleus Group of the Arena Theatre of Sao Paolo, of which I was the artistic director until forced to leave Brazil,” he explained. “It consists of several simple techniques for transforming daily news items, or any other non-dramatic material, into theatrical performances.

“- Simple reading: the news item is read detaching it from the context of the newspaper, from the format which makes it false or tendentious.

“- Crossed reading: two news items are read in crossed (alternating) form, one throwing light on the other, explaining it, giving it a new dimension.

“- Complementary reading: data and information generally omitted by the newspapers of the ruling classes are added to the news.

“- Rhythmical reading: as a musical commentary, the news is read to the rhythm of the samba, tango, Gregorian chant, et cetera, so that the rhythm functions as a critical ‘filter’ of the news, revealing its true content, which is obscured in the newspaper.

“- Parallel action: the actors mime parallel actions while the news is read, showing the context in which the reported event really occurred; one hears the news and see something else that complements it visually.

“- Improvisation: the news is improvised on stage to exploit all its variants and possibilities.
“- Historical: data or scenes showing the same event in other historical moments, in other countries, or in other social systems, I added to the news.

“- Reinforcement: the news is read or sung with the aid or accompaniment of slides, jingles, songs, or publicity materials.

“- Concretion of the abstract: that which the new is often high in its purely abstract information is made concrete on the stage: torture, hunger, unemployment, etc, are shown concretely, using graphic images, real or symbolic.

“- Text out of context: the news is presented out of the context in which it was published: for example, an actor gives the speech about austerity previously delivered by the Minister of Economics while he devours an enormous dinner: the real truth behind the minister’s words becomes demystified – he wants austerity for the people but not for himself.” (Boal 2008, p. 121)

In some ways it seems to me that you could view Kan Yama Kan itself as news onstage, all the more so in its presentation of the news at a time when conventional news media were undermined.

**Autobiographical underpinnings: theatre**

Desmond Tutu wrote of theatre as activism in a foreword to a late 1980s book on visual art in apartheid: “Nor can anyone doubt that protest theatre is a powerful instrument in a people’s struggle for liberation. Enacted on the stage for the audience to see are the experiences of their daily lives: the shame, the attacks on their dignity, the failures, the traumas, the triumphs, the joys and the laughter. That catharsis is a vital thing. People come to the forceful realisation that they are not entirely the impotent playthings of powerful forces…”(Williamson 2004, p.7)

Though I have noted in a belated confession in the book that I can “count the number of times I’ve been to the theatre in decades in Australia on one hand”, this was not the case before I left South Africa in my mid-20s. I might have been among the least frequent in the audience at productions of Shakespeare’s plays at the open air venue in a park just a few kilometres from my home in Cape Town. Instead, I took an interest in contemporary South
African productions on campus and other venues where I went to see works by the playwright, Athol Fugard, who favoured the stripped back and confrontational approach of the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, among others.

In apartheid-era South Africa I sought out activist art where I could find it. And I continued to seek it out on occasional returns over the years. On a visit to Cape Town in 2013, I happened upon a scuffed copy of *Woza Albert!*, a play I’d seen only weeks before migrating to Australia in 1982, and another influential play, Fugard’s *Bloodknot*, about two brothers, one dark, the other fair-skinned, which I had seen as a university student, at a second-hand book counter outside a shopping centre where I once worked part-time as a bookseller.

Mtwa and Ngema had collaborated on their play after acting in a play called *Mama and the Load* by township theatre producer Gibson Kente, whose musicals were popular in townships but rarely made it to white audiences. I’d seen performances of *Mama and the Load* and other productions by Kente at the University of Cape Town in the 1970s. In *A Knock at the Door* (Chapter Eight), I cited a mid-80s interview with Mtwa, Ngema and collaborator Barney Simon who wrote in the 1983 preface that “most of the southern African government policies are the result, they say, of their Christian Nationalists principles. *Woza Albert!* Is our fantasy of a Second Coming to South Africa by Morena, the saviour.”

Here again, theatre was a deliberate counter-narrative. In the introduction to a later edition of the *Woza Albert! Script*, Yvette Hutchison from the University of Warwick, wrote: “South African theatre history is complex and it has been dominated by the impact apartheid has had on all aspects of life, most notably in the way it marginalised and silenced the majority of South Africans. Also, in theatre practitioners’ responses to state-imposed silences, in their telling the hidden stories about the people of South Africa.” (Mtwa, Ngema and Simon, 2009, p.ix)

The writers and players in *Kan Yama Kan* adopted an increasingly collaborative approach with the players akin perhaps to a 1970s Fugard play, *Siswe Banzi is Dead*, in which the white playwright collaborated with black actors John Kani and Winston Ntshona. “Kani and Ntshona began by talking about their experiences as black South Africans,” Bruce Burton wrote. “Then they improvised on their experiences, sometimes acting out things that had happened to them, sometimes creating imaginary people and situations that were still
realistic, and sometimes entering a world of humour and horror which presented monstrous reflections of the reality of apartheid. As the two black men improvised, Athol Fugard began writing, structuring the real and imagined experiences of Kani and Ntshona into a play…” (Burton 2001, p.184)

Some South African perspectives on theatre in the apartheid era

Fugard considered this in an interview that appeared in a mid-1980s collection of essays and other material. “Just how potent politically my form of storytelling is, is something I still find myself debating. What I have settled for, and I think that this is as far as I can go with any conviction, is that I do believe our art is a civilising influence, and God knows, I think that South Africa is a country that can do with all the civilising influences that come its way. And I believe that my plays have made a contribution there; they have heightened the awareness of both white and black South Africans of certain social issues. I hope they are amusing too.” (Fugard in Daymond, Jacobs and Lenta 1984, p.27)

South African novelist, playwright and poet, Zakes Mda, had a clear sense of theatre’s role. “Theatre has always played a vital role in reform and reflection; and in South Africa, a society characterised by racial segregation, economic exploitation and political oppression, it continues to be a significant voice in the resistance of the repressed majority,” he wrote. “This it does despite, the censorious nature of the environment in which the artists work. In fact the harsher the hand of the censor, the more impressive the theatre...” (Mda in Daymond, Jacobs and Lenta 1984, pp.295-6)

Perhaps because it reached a smaller audience, you were able to experience/read in works of literature – poetry in particular - what you could not possibly encounter in the mainstream newspapers, let alone the government-owned broadcaster.

Reflecting the Australian experience?

Though I quote Arnold Zable in Chapter Twelve on the impact of Yiddish theatre in Melbourne in a 1990s book he wrote on a Melbourne-based theatre ensemble (Wanderers and Dreamers: Tales of the David Herman Theatre), the focus of this chapter is on black,
rather than migrant or refugee theatre. This was primarily because this was my own experience of a theatre of the oppressed.

In actor Lisa Maza, Kan Yama Kan had a direct link to one of the key figures in Indigenous Australian theatre. In a seminal book on black Australia, writer Kevin Gilbert quotes a comment made to him by her father, Bob Maza, director-actor with the National Black Theatre which went on tour in regional Australia after performing a presentation called Basically Black at Sydney’s Nimrod Theatre in October 1972. “The tour was a failure economically,” Bob Maza told Gilbert in Because a White Man’ll Never Do It. “But socially I don’t think so. Blacks who saw it up in Queensland loved it. It wasn’t so good with the white people. A lot reacted against the show and its content and production. They weren’t used to blacks talking like these young people on stage were talking - stuff on infant mortality, government harassment, government exploitation of blacks on missions. Most papers wrote it up as ‘allegations’. Allegations! Stuff we knew was quite true! So Queensland whites are certainly not ready for this sort of gear. Which is all the more reason why it has to go back there. Even a would-be sympathetic little old theatre critic at Innisfail couldn’t get over seeing Blacks talking up like these Blacks were doing both on-and off-stage.” (Gilbert 2013, p. 124)

Maza continued: “Black Theatre has tremendous potential. It can make blacks pull up and assess their situation, help them to think about where they are going, what they are lacking. Sure, a lot of traditional culture can’t be put on the stage, especially the spiritual stuff. But a lot can and it will help blacks in the identity thing. In my view, Black Theatre should be aiming, for the time being, at social comment. Give on-stage blacks’ views of the white society – the hard truth about its history, values. But we also have to attack apathy and laziness and our own black society as well. Hopefully it will be a two-edged attack.” (Gilbert 2013, p.126)

Boal saw in his approach a historic progression. “As we have seen in the first essay of this book, the poetics of Aristotle is of the poetics of oppression: the world is known, perfect or about to be perfected, and all its values are imposed on the spectators, who passively delegate power to the characters to act and think in their place,” he wrote. “In so doing the spectators purge themselves of their tragic flaw – that is, of something capable of changing
society. A catharsis of the revolutionary impetus is produced! Dramatic action substitutes for real action.

“Brecht’s poetics is that of the enlightened vanguard; the world is revealed as subject to change, and the change starts in the theatre itself, for the spectator does not delegate power to the characters to think in his place, although he continues to delegate power to them to act in his place. The experience is revealing on the level of consciousness, but not globally on the level of action. Dramatic action throws light upon real action. The spectacle is a preparation for action. The poetics of the oppressed is essentially the poetics of liberation: the spectator no longer delegates power to the characters either to think or to act in his place. The spectator frees himself; he thinks and acts for himself! Theatre is action!” (Boal 2008, p.135)

Rand Hazou does not specifically deal with Kan Yama Kan in his essay but describes the response to others including No Answer Yet which premiered at Newcastle’s Palais Royale on 4 April, 2002. He writes that its director Niz Jabour, who spent more than three years in detention in Iran after fleeing Iraq before escaping to Pakistan, recruited a group of local youths and with New South Wales Ministry for the Arts funding and support from Newcastle City Council, premiering the production despite abusive phone calls to the council. Then 21-year-old script writer and actor, Josh Wakley, received a death threat in a letter on the opening night of New Mercury Theatre’s production of Woomera at The Old Fitzroy Theatre in Sydney on 4 October 2002. “The police treated the death threats seriously and launched an investigation, forcing the production company to hire extra security for the venue throughout the production run.” A reading of the play, Purgatory Down Under, a farcical comedy written by Stephen Kinder and Jon Williams and directed by Alex Broun, was held outside the home of Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock “as part of a large rally organised by RAC (Refugee Action Coalition) involving some 300 protesters”.

Hazou writes that that the rejection of funding by the Commonwealth national touring fund, Playing Australia, for a production called Through the Wire led to the cancellation of a suburban and regional tour. Through the Wire premiered at Sydney Opera House Studio on 14 October 2004. Its director Ros Horin, who drew on interviews with detainees at Villawood and their supporters, wrote in a note in the production’s program that she sought to “reveal the human faces and stories of these refugees and their supporters”.
Similarly, the organisers of a campaign that included a theatre production of song and storytelling by asylum seekers went to Canberra in November 2003 at a time when scholarly papers say media was undermined by government, as organiser Mark Madden put it, “to humanise them...That was the genesis of it.”
Conclusion

In a previous draft of the book, I describe an early 2015 performance at La Mama in Carlton of a play called The Process. The actor who portrayed a Sri Lankan detainee had extensive acting experience in Australia and overseas, a Masters’ degree from the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) in Sydney and had trained with Stella Adler’s Studio in New York City. The Process was far more sophisticated as theatre than Kan Yama Kan. The actor at least as adept with the English language as any other in the audience at the small theatre and even if The Process succeeded to any extent in Boal’s terms as a “weapon” (2008) against oppression none in the small cast were in any way engaged personally in what Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire described as “reflective participation in the act of liberation” (Freire 1996). Unlike Kan Yama Kan, this was not a production performed by players whose voices the authorities sought to stifle. It was about such people, not by them.

But as I have written earlier in this exegesis, all the more so with parallels to the harsh treatment of asylum seekers both here and on Nauru and Manus island as I write, the book has some relevance to contemporary Australia. As I have indicated, my interest was not in theatre but in theatre activism at a particular time. I am not aware of any subsequent attempt to sway politicians by taking a theatrical production into Federal Parliament.

In Chapter Five, I cite reviews by two Melbourne theatre critics of Kan Yama Kan’s opening night. The Age headlined its review “a cure for xenophobia”. “When a performance by and about asylum seekers sells out before its first night, we are probably entitled to conclude that the minority of Australians who oppose the Federal government’s border protection policy are passionate and committed,” its theatre critic, Helen Thomson, enthused.

The Australian’s Martin Ball had some misgivings. As theatre, he concluded, Kan Yama Kan “struggles to get off the ground”. “The structure is simplistic, lacking dramatic tension, and the various narratives are episodic and disjointed. The amateur performers try hard, but stumble in rhythm and delivery...”

But this was not just theatre. “These criticisms must of course be weighed against the enormous achievement in simply putting the show together. The performers showed great strength and courage in simply being on stage, where they speak in a foreign language – English – and revisit moments of personal anguish and trauma.”
I started out writing a story about the consequences of the decision to open a door and found myself reshaping the narrative to focus on a theatrical production which acted as a counter-narrative to media coverage influenced by Howard government attempts to undermine sympathy for asylum seekers. “There’s a good case for arguing that any narrative account is a form of fiction. The moment you start to arrange the world in words, you alter its nature,” David Shields has written. “The words themselves begin to suggest patterns and connections that seemed at the time to be absent from the events the words describe. Then the story takes hold. It begins to determine what goes in and what’s left out. It has its own logic and it carries the writer along with it. He may well set out to write one story and find that he’s writing quite another.” (Shields 2010, p.65) And yet the opening of the door, retained as the book title, was integral to the story of the theatre action. The door was opened to language. The play facilitated the communication of personal stories by means of that language. The mastery of the language was empowering.

There is a parallel process perhaps in creating a narrative, as I have done in A Knock at the Door. You gain insight as you struggle with a narrative. My approach was informed by a related sense that the form is to be found, not pre-determined. So while I applaud careful structuring such as outlined by Jon Franklin this is not an approach I could comfortably adopt. On the other hand you don’t want to go unscripted. You do need a map; a structure. But the approach is similar to interviewing, where you respond to what is said and drop your line of questioning and head off at a tangent if something unexpected is said that interests. You remain open, alert and flexible and are pleasantly surprised as often as not.

“So I said, ‘Arif, how come you know where to go?’” Arnold Zable reminisced in Chapter Three. “He said, listen Arnold, if I can find my way from Afghanistan to Australia by boat, going through Canberra is easy.” Before visiting another place you may imagine it. But when you get there it is always different. You use your Melway/Google Map to plot. The PhD journey took me to the unexpected. I knocked at a door seeking insight and was let in.

The project was liberating in that I could write without fear of revealing personal bias as I do when working on my journalism. “My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice,” George Orwell (2004) wrote in his mid-1940s essay, Why I Write. “When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, ‘I am going to produce a work of art. I
write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing.”

My intention was somewhat different. I did not set out to expose a lie. I wanted to find out if my suspicions were founded and, if so, why. In writing the artefact, *A Knock at the Door*, I was engaged in research of a kind described by Paul Carter (2004) as “unavoidably creative”. I did not have the certainty of “fact” to which to draw attention. I had questions – on the way in which we in the media had conducted ourselves in reporting on asylum seekers at a time when scholarly research suggested we were influenced by government attempts to undermine sympathy by dehumanising people seeking refuge in Australia - and wanted answers.

I sought the answers informed by Practice Led Research in which, as explained in Chapter One of this exegesis, the creative practice precedes and drives the research. A key to this was to maintain a reflexive journal while writing the artefact. On wire-bound, ruled notebooks, I noted ideas, associations and observations. Each notebook was a key link that yielded material for both the artefact and exegesis. The note-taking proved an invaluable practice that I will adopt for future projects. However I remained uncertain about the integrity of a project that relied on my perspective as just one of several journalists who covered the issue to add to the writings by journalists including Peter Mares, David Marr, Marian Wilkinson, Michael Gordon and Margot O’Neill and help fill a gap in scholarly inquiry which has neglected the voices of Australian journalists. I found in autoethnography a qualitative research method that showed the validity of analysing the personal “to understand the cultural experience” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011).
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To: Assoc. Prof Michael Leach, FLSS

Mr Larry Schwartz

Dear Michael and Larry

**SUHREC Project 2012/230 A Knock on the Door: A non-fiction artefact and exegesis.**

Assoc. Prof Michael Leach, Mr Larry Schwartz, Prof Linda Briskman

Approved Duration: 21/11/2012 To 31/12/2016 [Adjusted]

I refer to the ethical review of the above project protocol by Swinburne’s Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC). The responses to the review, as emailed on 2 November 2012 were put to a SUHREC delegate for consideration and feedback sent to you. Your responses, as emailed on 18 November and 21 November (superseding a previous email) with attachments including revised consent instruments, accord with the feedback. I note a separate email attaching a letter of support from the Fitzroy Learning Network.

I am pleased to advise that, as submitted to date, the project may proceed in line with standard on-going ethics clearance conditions here outlined.

- All human research activity undertaken under Swinburne auspices must conform to Swinburne and external regulatory standards, including the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and with respect to secure data use, retention and disposal.

- The named Swinburne Chief Investigator/Supervisor remains responsible for any personnel appointed to or associated with the project being made aware of ethics clearance conditions, including research and consent procedures or instruments approved. Any
change in chief investigator/supervisor requires timely notification and SUHREC endorsement.

- The above project has been approved as submitted for ethical review by or on behalf of SUHREC. Amendments to approved procedures or instruments ordinarily require prior ethical appraisal/clearance. SUHREC must be notified immediately or as soon as possible thereafter of (a) any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants and any redress measures; (b) proposed changes in protocols; and (c) unforeseen events which might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

- At a minimum, an annual report on the progress of the project is required as well as at the conclusion (or abandonment) of the project.

- A duly authorised external or internal audit of the project may be undertaken at any time.

Please contact the Research Ethics Office if you have any queries about on-going ethics clearance, citing the SUHREC project number. Copies of clearance emails should be retained as part of project record-keeping.

Best wishes for the project.

Yours sincerely

Sheila
for Keith Wilkins
Secretary, SUHREC

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Sheila Hamilton-Brown

Administrative Officer (Research Ethics & Biosafety)

(Tues, Wed & Fri)

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