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CRITIC'S PICK

'The Jungle' Review: Migrants' Heartbreaking Search for Home in Calais

The Jungle | NYT Critic's Pick | Off Broadway, Drama, Play | 2 hrs. and 45 min. |
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By **Ben Brantley**

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The tumult that arises from many people of many nations trying to build a city together has subsided for the moment. It is the beginning of the second act of the thrilling drama “The Jungle,” which opened on Sunday at St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn, and it feels as if all the world is holding its breath.

Everyone on and off the stage — and the boundaries between the two are unnervingly porous in this immersive London-born production — is focused on the 17-year-old Sudanese boy, newly bruised and bleeding, with the ugly lattice of scars on his bared torso. His name is Okot, and he is about to enumerate the times he died — and no, he doesn’t say “almost died” — during his journey, thousands of miles across desert and ocean, to this migrant camp in Calais, France.

Portrayed by John Pfumojena with a concentrated stillness that absorbs light and sound, Okot asks an older member of the camp, a Syrian, if there is any point in his saying what he is about to say: “If I talk to her, you think she will understand?”

He’s referring specifically to Beth (Rachel Redford), an earnest young English volunteer in the camp. But the question encompasses us, the audience, too. Okot’s Syrian friend, Safi (the wonderful Ammar Haj Ahmad), answers, “She doesn’t know. They don’t know.”

At the end of Okot’s narrative, an account that makes “tragedy” (Beth’s word) seem inadequate and frivolous, he is asked, “How did you survive?” Another member of the encampment, an Eritrean woman (Nahel Tzegai), answers for all of them, “We didn’t.”

Up to that point, “The Jungle” has been a vigorously engrossing production, depicting the creation of the self-contained village of the title, a refuge for more than 6,000 migrants in 2015 and 2016. The play’s writers, the young Englishmen Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, set up an interactive arts center in that encampment, called the Good Chance Theater. “The Jungle” is based on what they observed and experienced there.

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As directed by Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin, with a set by Miriam Buether (lighted by Jon Clark), the production places the audience at the teeming center of a colony of displaced people and provisional stores, houses and churches. Benches border a network of runways, making theatergoers feel like part of the clientele of the improvised Afghan restaurant, set up by Salar (Ben Turner), which serves as a meeting place for these citizens of many — and no — nations.

The play begins in a moment of crisis, when the migrants are facing eviction by the French government, and then moves back in time to the camp's early days, when its highly diverse members were trying to establish a system for living together. Though most of the 18 cast members have one very individualized part to play, they seem to be a countless legion.

Their characters come from many countries — Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq and Iran, for starters. And the show summons, with uncanny clarity, the vigorous chaos from which a provisional order gradually emerges, as it asks, "When does a place become a home?" What we see does indeed seem to take the form, miraculously, of an autonomous nation in miniature, with a view across the channel of the British shore, the land they long to escape to.

There is tension, of course, and apprehension and suspicion — particularly of the various well-intentioned, clumsy English people who arrive to help build houses and organize sanitation. But the clashes are often comic, and the pure energy of actors creating a world of people creating a world of their own is exhilarating.

But don't be lulled into basking in your admiration and empathy for this diverse tribe of nomads. As exciting and entertaining as their exertions may be, the scarring pasts these characters carry and the profoundly uncertain futures they face are beyond the comprehension of those of us with homes, or even countries, to call our own.

That's what registers so harrowingly when the second act begins, with its description of Okot's journey of many deaths. No, we don't know what the people in the camp went through to arrive there; no, we can't.



Nor can the English creators of this show. And perhaps the most remarkable accomplishment of "The Jungle" is that it acknowledges this incomprehension without being paralyzed by it.

A crowd- and critic-pleasing hit in London, where it was first staged at the Young Vic Theater before transferring to the West End, "The Jungle" arrives here with bruising relevance to Americans for whom immigration has become part of a fraught crisis of conscience. "The Jungle" inevitably summons thoughts of the caravan of Hondurans in Tijuana and of President Trump's travel ban.

(It is worth noting that three of the cast members nearly didn't make it to New York because they are from the largely Muslim countries whose citizens are currently denied entry into the United States.)

Yet "The Jungle" is not one of those consciousness-raising exercises routinely described as "worthy." It is, above all, a work of absorbing theater, which uses the immediacy of that art to conjure the paradoxes and confusions of a world dealing with an unprecedented flux of uprooted lives.

The sensory flow of those lives is captured in both the artfully arranged rush of bodies in constant motion and an exquisitely textured aural soundscape that embraces both the taunting roar of nearby highway traffic and the susurrus of disparate voices melded in song and prayer. (Paul Arditti is the sound designer.)

There are no unconditional heroes among the characters so vividly embodied here. That includes our professorial narrator, Safi, whom Mr. Ahmad presents, beautifully, as a man ultimately stranded between altruism and self-preservation.

Each performance is slightly larger than life, perhaps for clarity's sake. And actors like Mr. Turner, as the charismatic restaurateur; Mohammad Amiri, as his industrious adolescent protegee; and Trevor Fox, as a hard-drinking, guitar-strumming Briton, have a touch of the music-hall charmer.

But each is also defined by human fears and frailties. It's the do-gooding, often hapless English who become surrogates for much of the audience, and they are given winningly ardent and angry life by, among others, Jo McInnes and, as a precocious city planner fresh out of Eton, Alex Lawther (the teen psychopath from the Netflix series "The End of the ___ing World").

The English volunteers are all, as Mr. Fox's character points out, themselves refugees of a sort, fleeing from their own lives. But the comparison with the real migrants only goes so far.

These English, after all, like most of the audience, have real homes waiting for them. By the end of this extraordinary work, it is achingly clear that for the migrants, even those lucky enough to cross the English Channel, home will never again be more than a memory, and an infinitely fragile illusion.

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Runtime 2 hrs. and 45 min.

Credits Written by Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson; Directed by Stephen Daldry and Justin Martin