

HARD WORDS FOR CHILDREN

Shakespeare, Translation and *The Merchant of Venice*

Travels in Refugee Shakespeare

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2014's 'Shakespeare in Za'atari' was the passionate project of the actor and director Nawar Bulbul, who came to Jordan after being blacklisted by the Assad regime. It was a 45 minute meshing of *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, and first came alive on a sparse patch of earth ringed by barbed wire, inside Za'atari itself. The audience was a mix of proud parents, foreign and Jordanian dignitaries and press; the performers numbered 120 young Syrians all of them un-homed by war.

It was the first in a trilogy of plays produced and directed by Bulbul from 2014-16, each performed on World Theatre Day, March 27. The second play, an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, was performed via Skype in Homs and Amman, by children – some trapped under siege, some living as refugees, having lost loved ones and been injured in the bombs. 2016's performance was a devised show called *Love Boat*, presented in Amman. Young refugee actors who found their confidence in *Romeo and Juliet* worked with professionals on a journey of a play, referencing writers from Moliere to Shakespeare as the imagined boat sailed closer to Europe carrying its cargo of refugees.

Working with Bulbul, I have been able to meet the participants and gather archive material, to consider what kind of real-world pressures shaped Bulbul's production process, and how these changed the presentation of the plays over time. I also look at the reception his work has received in media and online. One of the most important questions, for me, is – what impact do these plays have on the children who took part? Investigating this helps to build a clearer picture of how 'universal' cultural icons such as Shakespeare can be adapted to challenge ideals of 'universal' human rights, such as the right to freedom of movement, or participation in a cultural life, which seem to become suspended when 'citizens' from one state find themselves 'refugees' in another.

Preti Taneja is a Leverhulme Early Career Research Fellow Warwick University, working on literature and human rights. She is an AHRC/ BBC New Generation thinker broadcasting mainly on postcolonial literature and culture, global Shakespeare, and contemporary fiction, particularly in translation. Her PhD is in Creative Writing, and her debut novel, *WE THAT ARE YOUNG*, a retelling of *King Lear* set in contemporary India, will be published by Galley Beggar Press in July 2017. Prior to becoming an academic, Preti worked for over a decade in human rights as a film maker and reporter for NGOs working on issues faced by people affected by conflict from Rwanda to Iraq.