

Theater Review

Play shines light on refugees' struggles

Most of the population living in the United States comes from immigrant families. All four of my grandparents, for example, were born in different countries.

Having said that, present-day refugee displacement around the globe is getting worse.

One local organization opened a show on the topic this week called "Centrifuge." Divided into three segments, "Centrifuge" tells the stories of refugees from Vietnam, Central America, Syria and Palestine. The show is produced by JUST ART, a Stanford artist/activist collective, and features performances by Stanford students.

Vietnamese in Arkansas

The first of the three segments is a slice from Qui Nguyen's 2015 play "Vietgone." Here, after urgent evacuation during the 1975 fall of Saigon, a Vietnamese man and woman find themselves refugees in Arkansas. They are traumatized and facing a start-over in their lives.

The play is filled with twists and turns and ironies and paradoxes. Are these refugees lucky or unlucky? There is both comedy and injury in the racial conflict and language confusion. It's a story of hope against enormous odds, set in a surreal world.

The second Stanford segment of the evening, "Bestias," was inspired by the



KEVIN ALEXANDER MARTINEZ, at far left, Monica Romero-Lopez, Jasmine Espinosa Jaimes and Carlos Escobar appear in a scene from "Bestias," part of "Centrifuge: Stories of Refugees and Displacement," at Stanford Nitery.

poetry of Javier Zamora, as well as by Marissa Chibas' 2016 play "Shelter." Here we meet four Central American teens who debate climbing on a train (the "bestia," or beast) to ride north without adults to the U.S. border.

Their lives at home are dangerous and impoverished. One girl wants to be an engineer. One boy's father was decapitated by local criminals.

But the risks in flight are high. Some of the children will not see their

parents again, and others will not survive. On their journey, they face robbery, murder, kidnapping and other violence. A man who says he will help them with their crossing is unreliable and dangerous.

Migration into Syria

The third piece of the evening is "A Soiree for the 8th of November," based on a 1968 play by Syrian playwright Saadallah Wannous, about Palestinian

refugee migration into Syria following the Six-Day War.

At the start of this piece, a right-wing speaker shows up for a talk at Stanford and gets booed by the attendees. During the man's presentation, a Palestinian student jumps out of the audience and calls him a colonizer.

The show deteriorates into a shouting match, until the playwright is called up on stage to explain himself. After the hullabaloo dies down, a moderator, who is a geography professor, stands at a map and talks about border changes in the Middle East since 1916.

Last show today

The full title of the evening is "Centrifuge: Stories of Refugees and Displacement." It runs one more performance at 8 p.m. today at the Nitery, on the Stanford campus. Admission is free, but advance reservations are required.

The newly formed Stanford Refugee Research Project is also sponsoring panels and discussions this year to address the growing world refugee crisis. For information about their programs, visit refugeersearchproject.stanford.edu. For "Centrifuge" tickets and information visit centrifugeshow.weebly.com.

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