

***Refugitive* and the theatre of dys-appearance**

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This paper focuses on issues of embodiment specific to the experiences of an asylum seeker represented in the play *Refugitive* (2003). The play was written and performed by Shahin Shafaei, an Iranian asylum seeker who spent a period of 22 months in an Australian detention centre. The narrative of the play emerges through a conversation between the hunger-striking protagonist and his hungry belly. The unfolding narrative suggests an asylum seeker experiencing a disconnection from his body, or a rupture between his experience of body and self. Drawing on the phenomenology of mental illness explored by Thomas Fuchs (2005) and the phenomenology of pain outlined by Drew Leder (1990), I argue that the hunger strike depicted in *Refugitive* can be read as an effort to resist both the ‘corporealisation’ and the ‘disembodiment’ that can emerge in detention. By re-presenting the suffering of the hunger strikes in the theatrical frame, *Refugitive* speaks when the hunger strikers have been silenced. Adapting Leder’s term, I argue that this is a theatre of dys-appearance; it is theatre that makes the invisibility of asylum seekers apparent.

Keywords:

On 5 February 2000, *The Age* broke a story about a group of asylum seekers staging a hunger strike at the remote Curtin Detention Centre in Western Australia (Reardon 2000, 18). Although the newspaper alleged that the strike had been instigated to demand better living conditions from the Federal Government, it did not provide any details about the protestors and conditions in the camp. This lack of information was largely due to restrictions on the media seeking to report on immigration detention centres. Government guidelines at the time stipulated that ‘journalists may not interview any person who is detained under Australia’s immigration law, or photograph/film people in detention in a way that they may be identifiable’.¹ These restrictions inspired one detainee of the centre to write a play focusing specifically on the hunger strikes; it was titled *Refugitive* (2003) and was eventually performed by the author, Shahin Shafaei, after his release from detention.

Shafaei is an Iranian-born playwright and actor. In 1997 the Iranian authorities banned him from participating in theatre activities, yet he continued to have his plays produced in secret. In 1999, after rehearsals for one production were raided and the director arrested, Shafaei fled the country to Malaysia (Gilbert and Lo 2007). People smugglers offered him passage to Australia but his boat was intercepted by Australian authorities off Ashmore Reef on 19 June 2000. Shafaei was transported to Curtin Detention Centre where he was detained for a period of 22 months before being released on a Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) on 12 February 2002. During

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his detention he was segregated from the rest of the detainees in an isolation compound where he was refused access to newspapers, television and writing implements, and was prohibited from sending and receiving correspondence (Morgan 2004, 14). In writing the play, Shafaei wanted to expose details about the isolation compounds, as well as answer questions about the motivations behind the hunger strikes. He explains: 'I know Australian people wonder: Why do those people harm themselves? Why do they go on hunger strike? I try to make them imagine: What would you do in that situation?' (Harper 2003, 19).

Enactments of emaciation

Refugitive premiered at the Old Fitzroy Theatre in Sydney on 27 January 2003. Although the conditions of Shafaei's temporary visa made his critique of government policy potentially risky, he both directed and performed in the production. The play opens with a man being flung into an isolation cell of a detention centre. He doubles over, clutching at a pain in his stomach then begins to talk to his belly as if to a second character: 'you are hungry I know, but I'm hungry as well' (Shafaei 2007). As the conversation between the hunger striker and his belly continues, we learn about the man's journey to Australia, his detention, and the reasons motivating his current protest. As the play unfolds, he transforms into various characters he has encountered, enacting an Immigration Department official, detention centre staff, and even other detainees. In performance these episodes often involve humour and satire, requiring Shafaei to employ his highly developed acting skills to negotiate the quick character changes. By containing Shafaei's real-life experiences in detention within the structure of a contemporary performance laced with humour and satire, *Refugitive* circumvents what Salverson (1997) identifies as an 'aesthetic of injury', which risks reproducing configurations of power that maintain a subordinate position of victimhood. Towards the end of the play the hunger striker is inspired to write his story; one that he hopes may eventually be made into a play or a film. Yet unable to find a pencil, he instead recites a poem in the hope that the wind will carry the words to a brave pen that will document the truths he is unable to put to paper (Shafaei 2007).

While the play exposes the motivations behind the protest, by allowing the narrative to emerge as a conversation between the hunger striker and his belly, it also depicts an asylum seeker experiencing a disconnection from his body, a loss of bodily control, or a rupture between his experience of body and self. How can this rupture be read? And by illuminating this rupture, how does this play help to explain the incidence of hunger strikes?

Resisting disembodiment

Drawing on Thomas Fuchs's phenomenology of mental illness (2005), Drew Leder notes how 'in prison one's body is under alien control, constantly inspected, manipulated, and restricted', and often treated by authorities as 'something to be warehoused, marched about, or set to work' (Leder 2005). Leder argues that prison is a world that brings about the condition identified by Fuchs as the 'disembodiment of the self', in which patients speak of a 'split between their mind and their body, of feeling hollowed out, like a machine or a robot' (Fuchs 2005).

85 One way to read *Refugitive* is to consider the hunger strike that the protagonist endures as an effort to resist the disembodiment experience of detention. This reading emerges more clearly with a focus on the pain that afflicts the body in starvation. This pain was a central feature in the staging of *Refugitive*, enacted in a highly physical mode. As video documentation reveals, at several moments during the performance, Shafaei collapses on to the ground, his body racked by coughing fits that become increasingly pronounced as the action progresses (Shafaei 2003). In *The Absent Body* (1990), Leder provides a phenomenological analysis of pain, noting how it draws our attention back into the body, to the here and now. The spatiotemporal constriction that is induced by pain can lead to a new relation to one's body, with the body or a certain part of it emerging as an alien presence. Leder calls the principle whereby the body surfaces through pain 'dys-appearance', utilising the Greek prefix 'dys' to signify 'bad' or 'ill' (Leder 1990). The pain induced by hunger can serve to locate the detainee, drawing attention back into the body, and effectively resisting the disembodiment of detention. As a by-product, the painful belly surfaces as an alien presence, in Leder's terms, but with one important difference. Since *Refugitive* is as much a comment about the loneliness of the isolation compounds as it is about the hunger strikes, the play refigures the hungry belly as a companionable presence, and one that the central character can talk to, rather than as an unwanted alien distraction.

105 Resisting corporealisation

A parallel reading of the hunger strike depicted in *Refugitive* emerges when one considers the depressive environment of the detention centre. In his phenomenology of mental illness, Fuchs describes how in depression the density of the body, normally suspended and unnoticed in everyday action, is suddenly felt as a painful heaviness. He calls this process the 'corporealisation of the lived body' (Fuchs 2005). This is literally a corporealisation in the sense of 'resembling a corpse, or a dead body' (Fuchs 2005). Again Leder utilises this concept to argue that the prison environment affects the bodies of inmates in a similar way, producing 'corporealised' bodies that are 'passive', 'withdrawn', and 'helpless' (Leder 2005).

115 The protest portrayed in *Refugitive* can be read in this context as an effort to counter the helplessness and corporealisation of detention. The play highlights the hunger strike as an act of agency in which the protagonist exerts control over the one thing remaining to him: his own body. He reminds his belly that they have waited interminably for an interview with an immigration official in order to lodge an application for refugee status: 'during the last ten months we have tried all the possible ways, but never get any answer and this is the last one ... the last escape ... escape from ...' (Shafaei 2007). The protagonist yearns to be released from detention, but the lines also imply a yearning to be released from the imprisonment of a body afflicted by corporealisation. Discussing the relationship between starvation and incarceration, Maud Ellmann explains that 'self-inflicted hunger is a struggle to release the body from all contexts, even from the context of embodiment itself' (1993, 14). Such a release seems to work in tension with the notion of dys-appearance (though pain) as discussed earlier. By situating both bodily responses – corporealisation and disembodiment – in relation to incarceration, *Refugitive* helps to explain the motivations behind the hunger strikes carried out in

130 Australian detention centres. These protests are portrayed as attempts by detainees
to enlist starvation as a means to both attend to and move beyond the confines of the
detention centres and the confines of their own bodies.

Inverting self and other

135 Ellmann explains that self-starvation is above all a performance ‘staged to trick the
conscience of its viewers, forcing them to recognise that they are implicated in the
spectacle that they behold’ (1993, 17). Like all performances, the efficacy of hunger
strikes relies first and foremost on the presence of an audience, and linked to this
audience is the *raison d’être*: a statement or a list of demands that provides the
140 reasons behind the protest in the first place. To hold the body up for ransom, ‘hunger
strikers must declare the reason for their abstinence’ (1993, 17). Yet, in the Curtin
hunger strike of 2000, the government restrictions on media reports and the isolation
of detention centres ensured not only that an audience was missing but also that such
a declaration remained largely absent from public discourse. In the end *Refugitive*
145 fulfils this very need, becoming a delayed declaration that speaks for the hunger
strikers who continued to be censored from expressing their concerns to the world
beyond the razor wire of the detention fences.

Gerard Hauser observes that the hunger strike is an attempt to subvert a
superior power by becoming helpless before it. He notes that while the fasting
body in itself cannot force the authorities to cave in, insofar as this act of
150 helplessness succeeds in eliciting pressure from external groups it can have great
effect. Hauser (2000) points to the ‘web of discourse’ that forms around the
suffering body and which helps to mediate its claims. *Refugitive* toured extensively,
to over 40 cities and towns in Australia over a period of six months (Stephen
2004), at a time when hunger strikes continued to be a common occurrence in
155 detention centres. The tour was supported by community and refugee advocacy
groups such as the Refugee Action Collective (RAC) and Rural Australians for
Refugees (RAR), who assisted in advertising and promoting the production. In this
way the production became a locus for a ‘web of discourse’ to emerge through
which the hunger strikes could be closely examined. Moreover, each performance
160 was followed by a question-and-answer session in which audiences could interact
directly with an asylum seeker who had first-hand experience of the Australian
detention environment. During these sessions when audience members expressed
their willingness to be involved in advocating for changes in government policy
towards asylum seekers, Shafaei encouraged them to write to their local
165 parliamentary members (Shafaei 2005). As part of a composite performance, the
question-and-answer sessions addressed the audiences’ lack of information about
the conditions in the centres as well as pointing out a means of political
engagement. In this way the play encouraged active participation on the audience’s
behalf since, having borne witness to the effects of mandatory detention, to do
170 nothing, to voice no concern, would signal acceptance of this policy and therefore
implicate viewers in the forces of exclusion and censure that render asylum seekers
silent and invisible.

Conclusion

Refugitive highlights the effects that the detention centres can have on the bodies that they imprison. Enduring constant surveillance, countless musters and headcounts, mistreatment by staff, general boredom, and social isolation, asylum seekers begin to ‘unravel’, experiencing both corporealisation and disembodiment. And it is these features of detention, its bodily effects, that emerge most clearly in *Refugitive*. In this way the play works to ‘phenomenalise the political’ (Garner 1994), portraying the consequence of the detention policy by pointing to corporeal aspects and the rupture that may result in detainees’ experiences of self and body. By re-presenting the suffering of the hunger strikes in the theatrical frame, *Refugitive* speaks when the hunger strikers have been silenced. This is theatre that makes the invisibility of asylum seekers apparent. This is, to adapt Leder’s term, a theatre of dys-appearance.

Note

1. D. Seale (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Melbourne), personal communication with the author on media guidelines, 2006.

Notes on contributor

Rand Hazou was commissioned by the United Nations Development Projects in 2004 to travel to the Occupied Territories in Palestine to work as a theatre consultant running workshops with Palestinian youths. He is currently a PhD candidate at La Trobe University, Melbourne, investigating the latest wave of political theatre in Australia dealing with asylum seekers and refugees.

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