

## **Jumping on my Shadow – a writer’s perspective**

*Jumping on My Shadow* is a history play, a tragi-comedy and a ghost story.

It opens with the smell of baking bread, as three generations of refugees inhabit the same bakery at different periods in time.

Grandmother bakes ‘Story Bread’ but, burdened with guilt, won’t tell Granddaughter Anna the story of how she came to arrive by steam train at the gates of the ‘City of Bread’.

Fifty years after coming ashore in the ‘promised land’, Mr. Miah continues to bake his ‘Spice Bread’, but begins to question his loyalty to the ‘Empire’ and to his adopted home.

Josip arrives by plane, the ‘boy from nowhere’, catapulted into a new culture with nothing but the memories of his mother’s cooking, and a lively wit, to sustain him.

Gradually these three stories collide, in the bakery, across time.

Children try to come to terms with growing up in a grown up world. Adults are forced to question the lies and innocence that have sustained them over the years ... and all the while, bread, a metaphor for the cultural richness that immigrants have always brought to our shores, continues to rise and bake in the oven.

### **Why have we revived this play in 2017?**

Dragon Breath Theatre decided to revive *Jumping on my Shadow* six months before the Brexit referendum result was known. Even then, it was apparent that the questions and issues surrounding immigration and asylum that I wanted to respond to in 1999 were still painfully relevant today, even if certain circumstances have changed. The strong focus on migration that surfaced during the Brexit debate showed us that, unfortunately, the play remains just as pertinent 18 years on.

*Jumping on my Shadow* recognises that racist or isolationist attitudes are often born of painful feelings of disenfranchisement or powerlessness, as well as poverty, ignorance and fear of the ‘other’. Anna is outraged that Josip has entered her world and ‘stolen’ her Grandma, inherited her birthright, and eaten all the ‘jam’.

The play also suggests that it is moral, utilitarian and economically productive to welcome immigrants into our society. Grandma has brought up a family. Mr Miah is a pillar of a community that once regarded him with deep suspicion. Josip shows how eager he is to become a ‘part’ of the community in the City of Bread, despite his longings for home and family.

As a piece of drama for young people, therefore, we have set out to ensure that the audience empathises with all the characters, whether or not they agree with them. There is no point preaching to the either the converted or the unconverted. The play’s deliberately open ending encourages audiences to debate and argue their views, presumptions and prejudices.

The play’s unresolved conflicts are encapsulated in its final image of the play: The ‘Emperor’s’ police smash into the bakery, the place of refuge, and Grandmother vows to protect Josip to the end, to the dismay of her own granddaughter.

We all have to stand up for what we believe in. But at what price?

## **How the play was written**

Originally commissioned by Theatre Centre in London, *Jumping on my Shadow* was created in a way similar to Dragon Breath Theatre's ongoing process of making work by working alongside and listening to children's authentic voices. Many people, adults and children, contributed to my understanding of how the play should be written.

*Jumping on my Shadow* was inspired by the many-layered immigrant histories of Brick Lane in Tower Hamlets London, an area which has welcomed and nurtured successive waves of immigrants for hundreds of years – Protestant Huguenots fleeing persecution in Catholic France in the C17th; Jewish refugees fleeing the pogroms of Eastern Europe and Russia in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries (my own Grandfather, a child refugee from Belarus, happened to manage a pharmacy in Brick Lane during WW2); and more recently, Bangladeshis who fought for Britain in the war, or who came to the UK in the second half of the C20th. They have been joined by Eastern Europeans, Somalis, Maltese, Chinese and many others. Today these communities and new immigrants are slowly being pushed eastwards and out of the Brick Lane area by the advance of the wealthy and fashionable into a newly desirable 'regenerated' area.

Ros Hutt and I first workshopped the play's emerging ideas with children in a Brick Lane school. Their responses immediately sparked ideas and images, and suggested important themes to develop. The play was researched and developed by both young people and artists over a significant period of time. I was supported by the National Theatre to work with refugee and 'indigenous' young people in the Netherlands, and interviewed many adults – friends, and people who I'd never met before - who were kind enough to share their, sometimes difficult, experiences of refuge and asylum.

I hope they felt their experiences were reflected in the final script. I have made few changes to the original script, other than updating a few iconic elements (Mediterranean boats, long distance lorries, trampled border fences) that young people will be very aware of today from television and social media.

## **Thank you**

I would like to thank all the children and adults who helped to create the original play; Director Ros Hutt for enthusiastically picking up the baton again after such a long time; and my co-producer and designer Nettie Scriven for ensuring that young people have the opportunity to see this show, despite the economic challenges facing schools today.

We are also grateful for the support of our partners; Co-producers Nottingham Lakeside Arts; The Spark Arts for Children; Derby Theatre; and Inspire: Culture/Learning/Libraries. And to our project funders, Arts Council England.

*Peter Rumney*

*Writer/Joint Artistic Director, Dragon Breath Theatre, 2017*