

‘We’ve Experienced the Stories We’re Telling’: ‘The Jungle’ Is Back.

Five years after its American premiere, the acclaimed play about migrants eking out lives in an encampment returns with a mix of new and original cast members.

By [Rachel Sherman](#)

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At the Afghan Cafe, the smell of fresh dough, soft and earthy, lingers as the bread makes its way to the oven. Boxy televisions with old Bollywood films on a loop perch in the corners where the walls meet the ceiling. The floor is hardened mulch, the menu handmade. And all the patrons are a long, long way from home.

“The Jungle” — an immersive play about the residents of a makeshift [migrant camp](#) in Calais, France — is back at [St. Ann’s Warehouse in Brooklyn](#), where it had its American premiere in 2018. As

the story unfolds against the backdrop of the improvised cafe, the audience meets characters from Eritrea, Syria, Sudan, Iraq and Iran, who describe their harrowing journeys while confronting treacherous living conditions and impending eviction.

When “The Jungle” last ran in New York (the critic Ben Brantley called it a [“thrilling drama”](#) and [“a work of absorbing theater”](#)), President Donald J. Trump’s [travel ban](#) had virtually [blocked](#) citizens of many predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States, which meant three of the actors [nearly didn’t make it](#) to the stage.

This time, the production — featuring a mix of new and returning actors, many of whom are former refugees themselves — hoped for a smoother entry. Julie Hesmondhalgh, who portrays Paula, a do-gooder English volunteer dedicating her life to the women and children of the camp, and Mylène Gomera, who plays Helene, a Christian Eritrean traveling solo, are new to the company; Ammar Haj Ahmad returns as Safi, the show’s Syrian narrator, along with Mohamed Sarrar as Omar, a Sudanese refugee.



Clockwise from top left, Julie Hesmondhalgh, Mylène Gomera, Mohamed Sarrar and Ammar Haj Ahmad. Hesmondhalgh and Gomera are new additions, while Sarrar and Haj Ahmad are reprising their roles. Credit...Sara Messinger for The New York Times

But the return to the Brooklyn set has been a bumpy one.

“We obviously had some trouble last time, but we did find a way to get here in a sort of timely manner,” said Justin Martin, who directs the play with Stephen Daldry. “This time, we’ve actually found it a bit more difficult.”

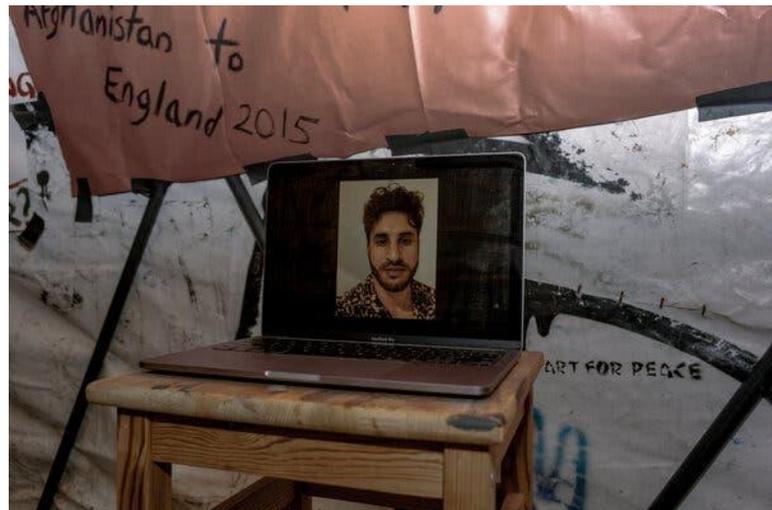
Once the show was scheduled for 2023, the visa problems began anew. Applications dragged on without explanation. One of the original cast members, Yasin Moradi, a Kurdish martial artist from Iran, is still waiting for his visa in London.

Others encountered obstacles upon arrival in the United States. Gomera, who is originally from Eritrea, was held at the airport for questioning.

“It took me a couple of days to let it go and shake it off,” she said. Yasin Moradi, a returning cast member, sits in London awaiting his visa. Credit...Sara Messinger for The New York Times

The American political context may have shifted, but [war](#), [natural disaster](#) and [economic collapse](#) continue to displace communities around the world — and the story of desperate people seeking safe harbor still resonates.

“When does a place become a place?” Safi asks at the end of the first act. “When does a place become a home?”



We spoke with five cast members about their connections to the show and where they find a sense of home. These are edited excerpts from the conversations.

Ammar Haj Ahmad

I am from Syria, and I am British, but none of it, to be honest, means anything. And maybe it’s corny to say, but it’s the truth. I am context, and I am human.

Home for me now is people. After what happened to Damascus, I don’t have the same relationship to places. Anything you build you can lose. Sometimes safety comes from attitudes and thoughts. That’s where home is for me, when someone is kind in nature and has the appetite to understand.

It can be tricky sometimes, because I am performing and people are clapping, and my sisters are sleeping in cars in southern Turkey — the center of the earthquake.

The last time I was here, I didn't enjoy any minute of it aside from the time I spent onstage. But I couldn't wait to come back. The cast are amazing and the audience is there around you. There is always the potential for it to be magical.

Mylène Gomera

I'm Eritrean. As cliché as it sounds, I'm really a global nomad on so many levels.

The role I play, Helene, is essentially my story, my route. It's such an honor to be a voice for Eritreans, especially Eritrean women. The responsibility I feel is immense.

The intention is never to leave your country. That's what gets lost. And you figure out that it isn't necessarily better, but it is safer. There is a constant battle of: Am I in a better place now?

To be in New York, to be onstage, to have come this far, to have no connections to the industry, to come from a tiny village in Eritrea — I'm constantly asking myself how this happened.

I'm new to the company, but I feel right at home. We're all taking care of each other; this play requires that. We've experienced the stories we're telling.

The Afghan Cafe on the set of "The Jungle," which integrates the audience with the cast, features catwalk-like runways throughout the makeshift restaurant. Credit...Teddy Wolff



Mohamed Sarrar

I am one of the people who lived in the Jungle in Calais. I lived it in reality, and now I'm doing it again. I've moved on, but I go back in my mind to show others what it was like there.

My homeland is Sudan. I fled when I was 25 because of what was happening in Darfur. I fled violence and evil.

Sometimes, onstage, the tears come, because it's not just about me, it's about all of the people who are still working to come, who can't leave.

Julie Hesmondhalgh

I'm U.K. born and bred. I come from a working class family in the north of England and I live in Manchester now, which is a city that is traditionally a city of protest and radicalism.

Back in my history there is Irish heritage, so with that always comes immigration and prejudice, for sure, but my connection to refuge and migration is purely as an activist. Let's put it this way: It wasn't me who was taken into a side room to be interviewed.

There's always a crisis of refugees, and you have to ask the question, "Why?" And racism has to be part of that conversation. That's why this play is so important: because it takes you right to the refugee stories, which we hear in a really real and personal way. And that's where art steps in.

It's an honor to play this role. I wanted this job more than any job I've ever wanted before.

Yasin Moradi

I am originally Kurdish from Iran. I am still in my home in London, unfortunately. It's been a long process.

I thought with Biden in office, we would go to the U.S. more easily, but it seems like it's harder than before. I am the only person who has been here for three weeks waiting without any explanation.

No one is forced to leave their land unless it is unsafe. I lived in the Jungle in 2015 for six weeks. We Kurdish people, we don't have anywhere.

The more people see this play, the more sympathy people have. It is hard to hate someone when you hear their story or laugh at their joke.

I am not there, but my heart is with them.