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The ephemerality of bearing witness: participatory refugee theatre with Syrian young adults in exile

Sofie de Smeta,b, Mark Fleishmanc, Cécile Rousseaud, Christel Stalpaertb and Lucia De Haenea

aParental and Special Education Research Unit, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences and Faculty Clinical Centre PraxisP, University of Leuven, Leuven, Belgium; bS:PAM (Studies in Performing Arts & Media), Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Ghent University, Ghent, Belgium; cCentre for Theatre, Dance & Performance Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa; dDivision of Social and Cultural Psychiatry, McGill University, Montréal, Canada

ABSTRACT
In this essay, we critically reflect upon the ephemeral nature of theatre. Such a reflection becomes particularly important in participatory refugee theatre, since the process of participants’ bearing witness to experiences of trauma and violence is emphasised as the core impetus. To this end, we investigate the experiences of Syrian young adults participating in a theatre project in Belgium. We argue that the ephemeral nature of theatre enables a potential to initiate reparative pathways of bearing witness by creating a space that may hold both remembrance and forgetfulness, as well as distance and interconnectedness. In a final section, we discuss the implications for theatre practice.

KEYWORDS
Refugees; collective violence; forced displacement; participatory theatre; ephemerality

Introduction

In this essay, we critically reflect upon the notion of ephemerality in the field of participatory refugee theatre. To this end, we shed light on the creative process of the participatory theatre project, Temporary, produced in collaboration with nine Syrian young adults who resettled in Belgium. Within theatre studies, the ephemeral nature of theatre has been widely discussed. A ‘performance becomes itself by disappearing’ (Phelan 1993, 146). In other words, performances develop only in the here and now in the simultaneous presence of performers and spectators. As Warstat (2009) elaborates, ‘Performances are created and then are gone: they can neither be preserved nor produced, and therefore they can only be experienced in the present’ (180). Yet, theatre scholars have questioned such a linear movement from presence towards absence and disappearance in reflecting upon the nature of theatre. For example, instead of linking the liveness and the ephemeral quality of the performing arts to ‘a linear temporality that moves from a past through a present to a future in which it dissolves’ (Schneider 2011, 142), Schneider observes how performance, in fact, always remains; the moment of performance is always ‘punctuated by, syncopated with, indeed charged by other moments, other times’ (Schneider in
Le Roy 2012, 32–41). In that way, the performing arts embody a continuity between past and present; a ‘cross- or multi-temporal engagement’ (Schneider 2011, 35). Furthermore, Julius (2021) argues that ‘re-performances’, which require a bodily archive of initial performances in interaction with performers and audience members, may create echoes and traces of the initial performance ‘as proof that they existed and that because of these echoes and traces they will never fully disappear’ (88).

With this debate as our backdrop, we argue that reflecting upon the notion of ephemerality becomes particularly important in participatory refugee theatre since the process of refugee participants’ bearing witness to personal experiences of trauma, loss, and violence in the ephemeral context of theatre is emphasised as its core impetus (Balfour 2013; Bundy 2017; Jeffers 2012). Indeed, participatory theatre aims to provide space where refugees not only gain political empowerment but also, by foregrounding society’s marginalised voices, counter dominant cultural narratives (Balfour and Woodrow 2013). By fostering personal agency, and through the open exploration of the imagination through aesthetic forms (Fleishman 2015; Rousseau and Measham 2007), giving voice to such narratives has the potential to initiate a profound personal transformation process (Jeffers 2008; Nicholson 2005). Participatory theatre may therefore acknowledge the value of performances to democratise the agency of remembering the past. This counters and resists the hegemony of specific dominant narratives regarding past histories of violence within societies. As Maedza (2019) has denoted, performances acted out by and within communities may install alternate memories within society, democratising the field of remembering potentially silenced histories.

Yet, the question arises how this process of bearing witness as a central impetus interacts with the ephemeral character of theatre. Do processes of bearing witness to past experiences in a performative encounter also inherently disappear or do they remain?

In thinking about this interaction, it is important to broaden the theoretical reflections in participatory theatre practices beyond the modes of representation and transmission in the performative encounter with an audience (Warstat et al. 2015). Therefore, unravelling the interaction between processes of bearing witness and the ephemerality of theatre should entail all relational actions, in- and outside the rehearsal space, off and on stage. Such an approach becomes increasingly relevant if we are also thinking about the political value of participatory theatre with refugees. Moving beyond focusing on a theatre product, Fleishman (2019) argues that, understanding theatre practice is an important ‘holding pattern, a pause or hesitation in time that opens up a space for a different kind of work, the work of embodied thinking, a kind of space (that takes time) for critical work in response to the world that does not need necessarily to become actualised as a product but is a political action nonetheless’ (149).

Second, in participatory refugee theatre, past histories of violence and loss take central stage. This requires a careful approach in the potential reactivation of violence in participants’ lived experiences of creative processes and theatre performances (de Smet et al. 2018). Furthermore, performative practices remembering past collective experiences of violence may always remain ongoing as ‘our many attempts to give form to an absence – whether in writing or display, or performance or in any other way – is tainted, imbued with failure, a barbarism’ (Fleishman 2016, 22). Fleishman adds that ‘we must embrace an anti-monumental impulse which in turn demands a persistent and active return in the work of remembering – a requirement to do it again and
again, over and over in an embodied, sensuous and experiential way’ (Fleishman 2016, 22). In sum, the question arises how ephemerality interacts with past and present experiences of violence in theatre processes.

Third, theatre scholars have put forward a heightened awareness of the socio-political context in thinking about the impact of theatre. Such a heightened sensitivity encourages scholars towards an openness to combine performance analyses, ethnographic and audience research and a close socio-political contextualisation of all events inside and outside the theatre (Bala 2019). Therefore, in this essay, we aim to particularly look at such a contextualisation with regards to the ephemerality of performances. Indeed, taking current political discourses into account, the value of bearing witness in participatory theatre as a vehicle towards the restoration of justice and a social fabric of a shared humanity and ‘never again’ (Lévi 1995) seems to encounter impairments given increased levels of polarisation in Western resettlement conditions. Confronted with a growing polarised climate of populism and xenophobia, refugees’ narratives may encounter a community of host society listeners with a limited capacity to listen to refugees’ experiences. Such a polarised social climate may further strengthen rhetorical representations of refugees as either vulnerable individuals or dangerous collectives (Jarvis 2020). Mobilising narratives in society that diverge from these poles towards greater complexity, even in ephemeral encounters, comes with the risk of exacerbating existing dominant representations with a rigid splitting between positions of solidarity and of anger.

Given the imprint of socio-political conditions regarding Syrians’ predicaments in Western host societies, a critical reflection on witnessing processes becomes pivotal in developing participatory theatre projects for Syrian refugees in exile. First, the polarised dynamics at play within the Syrian community itself may complicate processes of bearing witness within that community. Indeed, although a sense of cross-sectarianism lay at the heart of the Syrian revolution, the brutal oppression of the demonstrations by the regime has fuelled violent extremism and ethno-religious sectarian polarisation within the Syrian community (Al-Shami and Yassin-Kassab 2016; Corstange and York 2018), transforming the prevailing narrative as a fight against authoritarism (and for revolution) into a fight against terrorism (Herremans 2020). Furthermore, Syrians seek protection within Western societies that hold ambiguous positions towards the very human rights violations from which they have fled. Scholars have characterised the international community as being complicit in the conflict by offering financial, political and military support to violent regimes (Heydemann 2013; van Dam 2017). From this perspective, the impunity of the regime’s human rights violations are interwoven with the broader international community’s agendas, reinforced by the prejudice and violence against refugee communities in Western societies. Such dynamics of impunity may obscure for refugees the goal of witnessing human rights violations in society as a vehicle to reconstruct humanity and pledge for a ‘never again’ (Lévi 1995; Kirmayer 1996) strengthened by experiences of stereotyping and discrimination in the host country (De Cleen et al. 2017).

In sum, these arguments further complicate the notion of ephemerality in participatory theatre processes with refugees. Yet, up to now, there remains little in-depth knowledge from the perspective of the refugee participants themselves in participatory theatre. Therefore, in this reflection, we aim to further the understanding of the process of bearing witness in participatory theatre for Syrian refugees. We focus in this study on the various ways Syrian young adults engage in the process of bearing witness to their
experiences of collective violence and life in exile through their participation in a theatre project in Belgium. Through a qualitative meaning-centered approach, we aim to understand how refugee participants experience these processes of bearing witness in relationship to the ephemeral character of theatre. To do so, we conducted three interviews with each participant; one during the project (in the middle of the creative process), one in the direct aftermath of the performance (one week after the last public performance) and a final interview seven months after the project. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and took place in the presence of a professional translator. In the study at large, we explored the potential reparative mechanisms for the participants at play in in-group interactions (de Smet et al. 2019), as well as the tensions in the relationships between the participants themselves and between the participants and the director during the process of creation (de Smet et al. 2021). In this article, we specifically focus on our analysis regarding the process of bearing witness to experiences of collective violence and the life in exile.

Before proceeding with our reflections on ephemerality in participatory refugee theatre, we first outline the development of the creation process of Temporary (2017). This is followed by an in-depth description of the performance itself. In a final section, we discuss the possible implications of our reflections, raising questions about the value of participatory theatre as both an ephemeral and a sustainable, reconstructive space of bearing witness, which remains in times of protracted wars and polarisation.

**A temporary common playground**

As part of an interdisciplinary research project in the field of theatre studies and transcultural psychology on the role of trauma narratives in participatory refugee theatre, the manuscript’s first author initiated the theatre project, Tijdelijk (translated as Temporary), in Autumn 2017, in Belgium, in collaboration with a community centre in Brussels and the Iraqi Belgian professional theatre director, Mokhallad Rasem, who, at the time, was artist-in-residence at the Antwerp state theatre, Toneelhuis. The project was financially supported by doctoral research resources combined with external funds by a European Union youth funding programme. It received organisational support from the community centre and the state theatre.

Nine Syrian refugees, between the ages of 18 and 26, took part in the participatory theatre project. Although only a small minority of Syrian refugees worldwide are resettled within European borders, refugees of Syrian origin constitute the largest for recognition of refugee status in Belgium in 2016 and 2017 (cgra 2016, 2017). In Temporary, the nine participants and director worked towards staging a public performance rehearsing weekly at the heart of the Belgian capital city. All participants all fled pre-displacement stressors of war and organised violence in Syria, had lived in Belgium between 1 and 5 years, and had already been granted permanent resident status. Through the project – in addition to three in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant – the lead author of this contribution conducted participant observations during the rehearsals and public performances. In this way, the researcher developed a multiplicity of roles and positions in the relation to the participants: as a researcher, as a clinician, as a temporary family member, and as a friend. These circumstances urged us to engage in a reflective research practice in qualitative research by positioning a continuous and shared renegotiation
process regarding the boundaries of each role as a dynamic, internal, and external dialogue (de Smet et al. 2020). Furthermore, the research was inherently interdisciplinary, situated between psychology and theatre studies, with the researcher having an academic background in both fields. The notion of ‘researcher-as-dramaturge’ (Stalpaert 2017) became a concept vital to connect both disciplines in developing the main researcher’s role as a researcher conducting participant observation within a shared collective rehearsal space in collaboration with a professional director. In our study, the researcher acted as a witness as well as a moderator of whatever tensions that arose between the participants themselves and between the participants and the director, facilitating a dialogue between them (de Smet et al. 2021). For us, this role of the dramaturge resonated with the position of a researcher in refugee research since the latter also aims to reinforce participants’ agency through research participation.

As the project’s director, Rasem, led the weekly four-hour-long rehearsals, which culminated in six public performances staged in Brussels and Antwerp during December 2017. Rasem studied theatre at the Bagdad Conservatory and Bagdad University while creating his first performances. A European tour with his performance Sorry, Sir, I didn’t mean it in 2005 suddenly and radically changed the course of Rasem’s life. Against the backdrop of an increasingly protracted conflict and organised violence in his home country of Iraq, he applied for asylum in Belgium at the end of this tour. Rasem continued making theatre with Belgian organisations and gained extensive experience organising theatre projects in prisons, schools, and refugee camps, among other places.

In Temporary (2017), Rasem structured rehearsals around the overall theme of a collective imaginative transition of an unknown old world into an unknown new world. This theme shaped the starting point of the creative process and its group discussions, role-playing games, improvisational exercises, video-recorded interviews, and movement exercises. The structuring frame of an imaginative transgression was further conceptualised using an ever-increasing collection of words as they appeared and reappeared within group discussions. In this way, throughout the process, verbal language became more and more condensed into single isolated words that stimulated bodily and silent expression (Figure 1).

Participants were invited to give bodily and verbal expression to these words and to reflect upon their meanings in non-verbal collective movement exercises, in group discussions and in individual video-taped interviews with the director. Inspired by these key words, and encouraged by the director, seven participants decided to write texts, which were brought into the rehearsal space, performed, translated, and finally discussed by the group. All theatrical scenes and text materials used in the public performances were developed by the participants during rehearsals out of these improvisational and movement exercises. Additionally, participants were able to shape and reshape the very form of their participation on stage within the public performances at all times and were allowed to decide whether they wanted to perform on stage or not up until one week before the premiere would take place. In the end, all participants decided to take part in the performance. As the premiere approached, the collection of created expressive verbal, choreographic, auditory, and visual material and theatrical scenes were arranged into a continuum of scenes, during which all the participants were continuously present on stage. The performance, which lasted for approximately one hour, was staged six times in two Belgian cities in 2017. Although some audience members
represented the Syrian and other diasporic refugee communities, most audience members were Dutch-speaking, Belgian citizens with no migration background.

**A temporary performance**

As the audience enters the performance space in *Temporary*, the performers’ are already on stage, each carrying shredded pieces of white fabric. When the light dims, excerpts of the participants’ written texts and poems, pre-recorded in both Arabic and Dutch, are played, directing the audience’s attention to a multiplicity of parallel multi-linguistic auditory and visual signs. While listening to the self-written poetry, the audience witnesses the performers picking up their clothes before gathering behind a beautifully laid table decorated with white fabric and a diverse variety of fruits. In the same span of time, video fragments of the individual interviews mixed with images of moving clouds are projected onto a spacious white canvas backdrop. As the words disappear and the background music becomes gradually louder, the performers move very slowly towards each other until they are in front of the table and begin a collective journey moving towards the audience. In the background images of a pathway through the forest are projected. Having arrived in the spotlights, and in front of a king’s crown lying on the floor, the audience can now see that the performers’ faces have been painted in vivid colours. Suddenly, one performer slowly unfolds a shredded piece of fabric and presents it to the audience. It reads ‘Welcome’. This is the first in a chain of words. One by one, on shredded pieces of white fabric, each two feet by two feet, the performers present large, hand-written words in various languages including Arabic, Dutch, French, and English. The many pieces of cut
fabric function as meaning-shifting performative objects within the performance, varying from pieces of luggage to meaning-denotations explicitly shown word for word to the audience members. The music fades out and an endless silence fills the performance space. The performers continue to silently present words, one after the other, with footsteps and coughs being the only auditory signs. A series of tableaux vivants, during which the performers slowly move from one tableau into the other, from one emotion to the other extreme and back, breaks the silence for the first time: the performers start faintly whispering certain Arabic words. A sudden interruption in the chain of silent words occurs when one of the performers secretly picks up the crown. From this moment onwards, the audience witnesses a chain of absurdly and hilariously dominant Arabic-speaking rulers, kings, and queens. The performers alternately seize power by deceivingly taking away the crown until one of the performers refuses to become the group’s successor. This critical juncture confronts the performers, as well as their audience, with the increasing absurdity of power abuse. Fragments of texts written on large pieces of shredded white fabric convey a harsh reality: ‘Love is when the smuggler likes you so much that he puts you on the sea when the waves are not that high’ (de Smet, Nellis, and Rasem 2017). The scene results in a final rejection of the crown followed by a joint return to the table. Sequences of poetry are replayed, converging into the voice of Lebanese singer Fairuz, surrounded by dissonant chords. Meanwhile the performers prepare for yet another departure towards another new and unknown world.

A temporary modality of bearing witness

In conversation with the participants of Temporary, we observed that participants used a variety of modes of expression, all marked by a defined and ephemeral nature, and simultaneously confined in both time and space. Experiences of loss and suffering were often expressed using multiple formats, all of which had clear beginnings and endings. This included for example the defined character of the public performance, but also the defined frame of one theatrical act within the performance, and on an overarching level, the project itself. For example, one participant explained how the final interaction with the audience at the end of the performance initiated a return from the past into the present:

And at the end, after each performance, I’m in tears. Because I remember my life. But also because of what I saw. The pain of my friends, of my team. And the interaction with the audience makes it a bit harder. And with those tears I can have peace, in order that I can return to my normal life. (…) I believe, the tears were a border between two phases. Of pain and of return to reality.

These words touch upon the ephemeral character of the public performance itself. Herein, social interactions within the group and with the audience following the public performance seemed to foreshadow a structural end to a phase of bearing witness. The participant’s tears, the tears of her colleagues and those of audience members during the final scene of the performance, symbolised a tipping point, concluding this phase of expression of her life history.

Secondly, in addition to the borders induced by the performance – the defined nature of distinct theatrical acts with a clear beginning and end, for example – performing texts
fragments, songs, and movements, also seemed to provide ways for generating defined forms of expression. For example, one participant revealed that a certain song had brought him into a state in which he was able to express personal experience of loss. For him, the final words of the song designated a symbolic point at which he could return to reality: ‘Yes, when I’m singing the song, for me it is such a situation that I go back in a state of trance and if the song is finished, I go back to myself’.

Thirdly, the project in its entirety seemed to be a temporary step bound to a particular time and space within the participants’ lives. Listening to the participants, this temporary phase of bearing witness to personal memories stood in stark contrast to their current engagements with the past, with a strong focus on forgetting in daily life. One participant explained how she restored her memories after the project:

There are memories, in my sub-consciousness, in my brain. But during Temporary those (memories) came back. I gave them the permission to come back, in that temporary space, but now, not anymore, of course. I restored them at the same place and forgot them.

In the same vein, several participants referred to the texts that they wrote during the project as a particular moment in their life history. They were described as documents referring to a specific time and place in their lives that should, above all, remain there.

I received requests to perform the text in other ceremonies or parties or to write something else. (…) But, I only want this text for our performance. It is only for Temporary.

Researcher: Only for Temporary.

Participant 1: What I mean is, I wrote it for Temporary and it will always be Temporary.

Personal relief and control in the reactivation of traumatic pain

Bearing witness to loss and suffering within these defined and ephemeral containers seemed to bring forth a sense of personal relief while, at the same time, drawing boundaries around the reactivation of painful feelings. Participants revealed that, though painful, expressing personal memories resulted in a sense of personal relief since it may have enabled a discharge of the pain and anger that had been enclosed in their inner world. For example, one of the participants wrote a poem that referred to his life’s trajectory when he was forced to leave Syria. In an interview, we watched the moment he recited his poem for the first time and explored how this brought him a sense of relief: ‘At that moment, I was exposing myself, exposing my weak sides. After I told it, I was calm and relieved that I told it. A lot of things that I said are the result of my own experiences’. Another participant expressed listening during each performance for a particular text fragment in order to be able to weep for the loss of her family and country: ‘Every time I await this text with joy to listen to. (…) I waited for that moment to be sad, that I do not have to be strong all the time’. The participant seemed to allow herself to reactivate and reconnect briefly with strong emotions during the recollection of painful memories in a defined theatrical moment, namely that particular text. It seemed to induce a sense of regaining her control over these painful memories within the performance event while offering a moment to relieve her pain, which she had otherwise avoided in daily life.
A space for remembering and forgetting the past

By further exploring the ephemeral dimension of bearing witness, participants related the discovery of a bounded form of expression to their shaping of a future in resettlement. In other words, the temporary container allowed them to bear witness to life histories that were inexpressible in their daily realities oriented towards a prosperous future.

I can’t keep on struggling with my memories about Syria, about the war in Syria, I have to rebuild my future, I have to keep my life in mind. But in the performance, it was a different context. It was temporary and I’m allowed to go back to Syria for a short while. It was temporary (laughs). (...). Yes that is why, after the performance, I understood why our project is called Temporary.

The ability to account for traumatic experiences of violence in Syria within a temporary container seemed to function as a vehicle to deal with a lingering moral imperative. It made it possible for participants to remember family and community members left behind while, at the same time, to safeguard their future and the idea that the sacrifices associated with a diasporic life have not been suffered in vain. Telling one’s story offered avenues of nurturing community ties ruptured by forced displacement. Within these defined forms of expression, it became possible to hold on to, not only family, but also the future.

We all try, of course, to forget and to avoid those painful memories, but Temporary has a function within our life here. As Syrians we cannot forget that we have family as well, that we have family members, friends, who are still living in oppression, who still suffer the consequences of war.

Here, it is important to notice that some of these temporary containers, the poetry and prose for example, were developed outside the rehearsal space. One participant expressed how painful it was for him to write the text at home. He described how he became overwhelmed by painful memories and by a strong sense of loneliness.

But when I was writing the text, just all those memories of my family, of my friends came back to my head. And then you just start thinking, yes, you are alone, and you will stay alone.

This example stresses the value for bearing witness to take place within the community. More specifically, the expression of stories of loss and suffering took place within a collective space-holding environment, in the bodily presence of other Syrians in the workshops and the performances. Such a collective embodiment could act as an important vehicle for participants to receive social support and to restore a sense of unity for a Syria shattered by collective violence.

Temporal and transnational connectedness and change

In relationship to the public character of bearing witness, it seemed that the public arena of the performance played an important role for participants to enter a dialogue with both members of their home community (both in exile and in Syria) and the host society. For example, we observed that by bearing witness on a public platform, participants seemed able to answer to a moral obligation towards the home community, which resulted in an interweaving of their personal lives with those people who endured, or who are still enduring, injustices in Syria. For example, one participant resolved to testify about
the death of the civilian victims in his hometown of Raqqa in order to redress their martyrdom. In Islam, people who are unintentionally killed by human-made atrocity receive God’s grace as *shahid* (‘martyrs’ in Arabic), and gain immediate access to heaven. He told how Western media focused on Raqqa as a stronghold of Islamic terrorism, disregarding the suffering of Raqqa’s civil population. In his text, in the presence of witnesses, his aim was to rectify the incorrect phrasing of ‘civilian victims’ used by the Western media and instead explicitly honour his fellow citizens of Raqqa. Furthermore, bearing witness in a public format allowed participants to reconnect with the Syrian community by playing an active role in offering social support to members of the diaspora. Participants actively engaged with their own suffering to create a transitional space for other community members in exile to feel heard and consoled. One participant explained how, with his poem, he felt as if he were expressing the stories of many other Syrians. Parallel to his personal sense of relief that came as the result of his expression of an internal reality, he indicated how that same expression could also bring relief to other Syrians who witness his words.

I invited many people and they heard that I will read poems but they don’t know what. Lots of people will hear it and I know for sure that it will calm them, because we all come from the same damaged country.

Having been confronted often with stigmatisation and hostility in the host country, several participants also attributed an important role to expressing their histories of collective violence as well as their experiences of racism and violence in the host country while in the presence of the audience as witness. This could, they thought, contribute to the remobilisation of empathy for the human suffering of Syrian refugees and change the dominant dehumanising representation of Syrian refugees. Participants stressed how bearing witness also offered them the opportunity to counter dominant stereotypes of refugees as economic fortune hunters, which disregarded the cultural richness of Syria, and as potential threats for society. For example, one of the participants ridiculed the Western fear of beards and tackled the dominant narrative of the Syrian conflict, which focuses on the recent uprising of Islamic terrorism and stereotypical images of Arab men. In doing so, he confronted the audience during the public performance in an ironical way, by using one specific one-liner, written on a shredded piece of fabric: ‘I have a beard’.

Furthermore, the experience of an emotional transmission to host society audience members seemed to re-establish a sense of human connectedness. For example, one participant pointed out how witnessing the tears of the audience members who had witnessed her story alleviated her pain in the moment of expression. Becoming a witness of emotional transmission also appeared to create a moment in which a core of interpersonal trust could be regained:

It is beautiful to see how the audience, with a different culture, has returned to its human source. And they shared that with you, that suffering. That helps us to make our suffering a bit less.

Participants also emphasised the meaning of bearing witness to challenge broader political dynamics at play within the international community. For example, participants indicated how they hoped bearing witness in the theatre project might change the dominant narrative of the Syrian conflict in the international community. For example, one
participant mentioned how the performance had created the opportunity to disclose those stories of Syria’s long history of oppression and repressive dictatorship that have been silenced by the media. In doing so, the participant wanted to tackle the language of the media, with a focus on Islamic terrorism, and to put the development of the Syrian conflict into a historical perspective. Another participant stressed the importance of recalling painful memories of oppression and violence during his school years in Syria under the authoritarian rule of the regime. Although he articulated a strong wish to forget these memories, he emphasised the importance of witnessing these events during the performance to expand the current debate on radicalisation in Syria and in the Arab world.

However, while listening to the participants, we noticed a critical awareness on behalf of the participants with respect to the ephemeral character of that interaction during the performance. Participants shared thoughts about how witnesses could easily forget this mutual experience at the public platform and how it generated painful experiences of voyeurism and temporal instrumentalisation, as one participant described it: ‘For some people it was like a show, a real show’.

This critical awareness may have protected participants from feelings of disappointment and disillusionment against the backdrop of the chronic nature of the Syrian conflict and the ongoing confrontation with institutional racism (Orsini et al. 2022) and social injustice in Belgium. In a final interview with one participant several months after the public performances, it became clear that his initial hope for social and political change in Belgium – which had been a key theme in the first two interviews conducted during the creative process – was diminished considering current incisive, everyday experiences of administrative discrimination in relationship to institutions in Belgium. The participant explained how, in the end, his struggle for change only served a personal matter:

Temporary just means a struggle for myself. (…) I struggle, I do, in me, an inner revolution. But not with the people, with the audience. It was alone. Inside. In me. I do a kind of struggle because I’m Syrian. A kind of struggle, but not one to share with the audience. Not to receive some results from the audience. It is only in my heart. Inside.

The participant compared his initial hope for political change by means of his testimony in the theatre project with the Syrian revolutionary experience as he explained during an interview:

Like the Syrian revolution. We revolted but some people did not accept it. And some did. So … We did that. The mission. But … We will not wait for results. We did it for ourselves. That is it. The same. (…) We expect of course that there will be positive things, that is also a mission. We took action, but we are not sure if there will be change. But we have to do it.

Months after the project, his testimony may have answered to a moral obligation towards the Syrian community to continue the struggle of revolution in exile. At the same time, the theatre project allowed him to combine his personal struggle with the collective project for the entire Syrian community. By emphasising his political commitment towards the Syrian cause, it may have enhanced connection with his home country against the backdrop of increasing feelings of disconnection from the host community.

This same participant was reluctant to participate in the rerun of the public performances one year later. Arguably, his wish to avoid further testimonies in public
performances was a way to protect himself by avoiding being confronted once more with the unwillingness of host community members to listen to his pain, which was reflected in the continuation of structural violence in his daily life.

**Conclusion**

Based on our findings, we argue that the ephemeral nature of theatre enables an important potential to initiate reparative pathways of bearing witness by creating a space that may hold both remembrance and forgetfulness, as well as distance and interconnectedness simultaneously.

First, it seems that the ephemeral nature of theatre touches upon the heart of theatre’s value as a reconstructive space of bearing witness in participatory refugee theatre. However, beyond the ephemerality of the encounter, our reflections urge us to broaden this perspective and value the entire practice of theatre making as an ephemeral time and ‘gap’ of contemplation (Fleishman 2019). Indeed, the ephemeral reality of theatre seems to provide a means to modulate a temporary safe balance in a persisting dialectic between the wish to express and the desire to forget experiences of collective violence and forced displacement (Herman 1992). In particular, the temporary space of the theatre project allowed participants to express traumatic life histories to remember human rights violations that prevented the forgetting of inhumanity in Syria (Brough et al. 2013) in line with the rationale of memory work of truth commissions (Shaw 2007). At the same time, as participation and remembrance were temporary and ephemeral – put to an end as soon as one leaves the rehearsal room, the stage, and the project – participants could uphold a coping strategy of active forgetfulness and silencing (De Certeau 1987; Foxen 2000). This allowed them to focus on the future and avoid the reactivation of pain while dimming the unbearable thought of Syrians still suffering in the home country. In that way, the conceptualisation of theatre as a linear movement from presence towards absence and disappearance (Phelan 1993) could support participants in their urge for their testimonies to ‘disappear’ in daily life. However, our reflections also brought to light participants’ critical awareness with respect to the same ephemeral character of theatre experienced by the host community witnesses who may quickly forget the mutual experience as soon as they leave the performance. The temporary reality of theatre may therefore protect participants from the reactivation of suffering during the process of remembering due to the temporary willingness of host community members to listen. Beyond that, it could protect them from a sense of being instrumentalised for host community members’ feelings of benevolence by attending the temporary performance (Jarvis 2020; Kirmayer 2002, 2007; Kronick and Rousseau 2015). In this respect, it is noteworthy that permanent artefacts of the theatre project, for example poetry and written texts, video recordings and pictures of the workshops and performance, were turned into a vehicle for participants to create more permanent markers of testimonies in relationship to the home society. In that way, participants may have partially overcome the transience of their testimonies within the ephemeral reality of theatre and created what Julius (2021) would call ‘re-performances’. The traces of their testimonies would therefore never fully disappear.

More specifically, participants shared these material traces with family members and community members in Syria via social media. They became important carriers of
meaning and continued to play roles in a process of remembrance within a digital, transnational space of family and community members (Falikov 2007; Shapiro and Montgomery 2020). These traces seemed to offer participants a pathway to show their continuous engagement for the Syrian cause. Yet, as the active remembering process in writing or reciting the texts, movements or expressions lay in the past. Remembrance was bounded in a timeless material format, which protected the participants from the reactivation of pain.

In sum, our findings call for a further reflection on how to embed participatory theatre in a dramaturgy of a temporary transnational landscape. First, Fleishman (2015) describes the dramaturgical process as ‘a slow journey of discovery, responsive to what is encountered in the landscape travelled through’ (22). We argue that there is meaningful potential in participatory theatre for the unique development of a ‘dramaturgy of the landscape’ during each part of the making process (Fleishman 2015, 22), as a collaboratively evolving unit to be discovered through continuous negotiation and engagement of participants, directors and dramaturges. In this landscape it is important to be aware of the potentially disempowering dynamics within the interaction between the director and the participants, and between the participants themselves as we also observed in our case study (de Smet et al. 2019, 2021). In addition, based on our findings, we aim to broaden this concept towards the discovery of the dramaturgy of a temporary transnational landscape. The concept of transnational in this description challenges dominant ideas of migration and national affiliations as fixed entities in a one-way direction and creates a social field in which different and moving forms of belongings and identities can exist (Borsca and Hille 2016). We argue that a transnational landscape, may integrate – at least imaginary – witnesses with family and the community who are still living in the home country and provide opportunities for transnational engagements in the sense of moving beyond narrow national allegiances and nationalistic identities. In that way, in the mobilisation of witnesses, the question arises how the scope of bearing witness in participatory theatre with refugees may be further expanded beyond a dominant focus on long-term socio-political changes, in relationship to the host society, towards a focus on a more temporary landscape built on intense experiences of ‘interconnectedness of living systems’ (Mbothwe and Barnes 2015, 60) including the host, diasporic, and home country communities in a globalised world.

Therefore, the practice of bearing witness in theatre – the process of becoming public and therefore political – starts at the very beginning of the first rehearsal and continues beyond the final performance. Overall, it is important to acknowledge how these processes of bearing witness within the dynamic micro-encounter of the rehearsal space are embedded in a macro socio-political context. Indeed, macro socio-political dynamics have the potential to continuously change broader diasporic and intercommunity relationships, entering the permeable, safe rehearsal space, and impacting in-group dynamics and interactions with the host society (de Smet et al. 2018). Therefore, participatory theatre may perhaps also precisely hold the reconstructive modality of a temporary landscape of (theatre) engagement. The temporariness of theatre may facilitate a conversation on being temporary. It may contribute to a temporary space of remembrance and hence become a remembrance of a temporary time of connectedness in a co-constructed space, the memory of which can last and be shared with others.
Based on our findings, in this final part, we discuss several implications of our reflections and formulate suggestions for practitioners in participatory theatre with refugees in Western host countries. First, it seems that creating contained performative dimensions in the rehearsal space is another way to modulate a temporary safe balance within the participants’ persisting ambivalence between expressing and withholding experiences of collective violence. We observed this in the contained character of exercises and rehearsals. These findings might encourage practitioners to further strengthen the temporary time of workshops and performances by creating particular rituals, or ritualised closing exercises (de Smet et al. in press), in order to symbolically conclude exercises and rehearsals and to offer a structuring framework.

Secondly, our reflections urge practitioners to carefully reflect on the mobilisation of witnesses, including home and diaspora community members, as well as members from the host society. Indeed, the importance of witnesses from the home community who are still living in countries of origin may encourage practitioners to develop a diversity of public formats, including more digital formats and more permanent documentations of ephemeral encounters, which could foster a process of witnessing that transcends physical boundaries.

Last, our reflections may also contribute to a critical perspective on the idea of sustainability of participatory theatre projects with refugees. In the process of bearing witness to trauma, temporary and ephemeral modes of expression seemed to have a supportive value for participants. This temporary mode of bearing witness was also reflected in the delineated time frame of the theatre project itself. While the theatre project was indeed limited in time, this specific finding may blur an all-too-narrow focus on the benefits of striving towards long-term theatre projects with refugee communities. Here, it seems important for practitioners to facilitate the autonomous choice of the participant to engage in temporary formats of expression and participation, such as the development of consecutive participatory theatre projects within a structurally embedded organisation. In that way, participants can become active agents in decision-making processes, allowing their participation in theatre to be in some ways always temporary.

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