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The Refugee Women

By Don Zolidis

(with a special nod to Euripides)

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One-act drama

13F 4M

To give shape to the endless days in a refugee camp, a group of girls from different countries come together to put on a production of The Trojan Women with the help of an aid worker. The girls come from everywhere from the Middle East to Africa, but they all connect fiercely with Euripides' play, which tells the story of the aftermath of the Trojan War through the eyes of the women in a conquered city. Soon, others are clamoring to join the production, and the roles encourage the girls to share their own stories of trauma in their pasts and uncertainty in their futures. The Refugee Women is an arresting and immediate tale of resilience.

Cast of Characters

PROMISE, 15, a Nigerian refugee

CLAIRE, 20s, an aid worker

HADIZA, 14, a Syrian refugee

BETHANY, a refugee

MERCY, a refugee

AMIRA, a refugee

GIRLS 1-7

DANNY

JOHN

BOYS

Casting: Although I have envisioned these roles played by actors of Middle Eastern or African descent, I feel it's important that they may be played by actors of any ethnic heritage.

If at all possible, the role of Mercy should be played by a girl with African or African-American heritage.

More girls and boys may be added as needed.

(The set of the Trojan Women. A ruined landscape built by materials available in a refugee camp.)

(At rise, the CHORUS is upstage, frozen.)

(BETHANY lays face-down centerstage.)
(She rises slowly.)

BETHANY

Lift up your head.
Lift up your eyes.
Rise, woman. Look around.
Troy is no more. And I am no longer its queen.
Queen of nothing. Queen of dust and mud.
Rise. Get on your feet.
What good is it to weep over your loss?
Spill tears over your dead?
Your husband.
Your child.
Your country.
All dead. As if they never existed.
So what will you do now, Queen of nothing?
(Thunder.)
(Sound of rain.)
(The CHORUS freezes in a new position. BETHANY joins them upstage.)

(PROMISE emerges from the chorus. She speaks to the audience.)

PROMISE *(to the audience)*

At night, when it rains, it sounds like gunfire.
For a moment, I forget where I am. And I am home. And they are coming.
(mens' shouts from offstage)

MEN *(off-stage, overlapping, repeating)*

Get up! Get out in the street!
Everyone out in the street!
Now!

PROMISE *(to the audience)*

But then I wake up. And I am here, and it is only the sound of the rain on the tin roof.

The days were empty in the camp. Nothing to do. I missed school, having a place to go where me and the other girls could talk. Here, there was no school. Nothing to do. So...

(CLAIRE, an aid worker, steps forward from the chorus.)

CLAIRE

It was Promise's idea for the play.

(Lights change.)

PROMISE *(in the dark)*

I sing of fabled Troy, greatest of all cities, vanished and dead.

(BETHANY resumes her position as the lights come up on her.)

BETHANY

So what will you do now, Queen of nothing?
Weep forever?
No. Lift up your head and curse the day they came to us.
In their ships, over the dark, shining sea.
Chasing what? A woman? All this for one woman?
No, they came for their pride. Their greed as sharp as any weapon.
And my city is nothing but smoke now.

(The CHORUS starts speaking to BETHANY.)

GIRL

I heard you Hecuba.

GIRL 2

Are they coming for us?

GIRL 3

Tell me they aren't coming!

BETHANY

They are coming for us.

GIRL 4

And what will happen? Will we be taken?

(Other girls appear)

BETHANY

Who will stop them? You? You? Have you weapons to fight them?

GIRL 5

I'll die before they take me.

BETHANY

You say that.

GIRL 5

I mean it. If one of their men touches me, I'll cut his throat.

GIRL 6

I'll fight them with my hands!

GIRL 7

I'll claw their eyes out! Or die. I'll end my life!

BETHANY

Perhaps you will. Or perhaps you will decide that life, at any cost, is worth enduring. When we find ourselves face-to-face with fate, who knows what we will do? We are cowards, all.

(Lights change.)

PROMISE

Actually it was Claire's idea for the play. She's an aid worker.

CLAIRE

No it wasn't.

PROMISE

You said, let's do Trojan Women and I said I have no idea what that is.

(BETHANY approaches them.)

BETHANY

I don't want it to be silly.

CLAIRE

Just because it's called a play doesn't mean it's silly.

BETHANY

I want people crying at the end.

(HADIZA approaches from upstage.)

HADIZA

Why would people come see a show if it's going to make them cry?

BETHANY

Because it means something. And because I'm acting in it. I want them saying `ah she was so good. What is she doing here? Where is Hollywood?'

HADIZA

You're not going to Hollywood.

BETHANY

You never know. Dream big. Look at this.
(she presents a shocked face)

CLAIRE

What am I looking at?

BETHANY

I'm acting.
(she does the shocked face again)
Yes?

CLAIRE

That's great.

BETHANY

Hollywood loves this face.
(she returns to her spot)

(MERY comes forward.)

MERCY

Do I have to speak?

CLAIRE

No one has to speak.

PROMISE

We'd like you to speak.

MERCY

I'll stay quiet then. I'll just make the movements.

(MERCY heads back to the chorus)

PROMISE

So we begin to rehearse – we read the play – we learn the lines –

(Upstage the girls begin to move to practice the play)

CLAIRE

You're forgetting the boys.

PROMISE

I am, yes. Any time a group of girls starts doing anything -

(The boys enter, led by DANNY and JOHN.)

DANNY

We've talked about it, and we want to be in the show.

PROMISE

No. It's a girls' show.

JOHN

You can't just have a girls' show. That's stupid.

PROMISE

It's about women. It's in the name. The Trojan Women.

DANNY

You aren't women. You're girls.

PROMISE

You can do your own Trojan boys play if you can sit still long enough.

CLAIRE

We actually need some boys. To play the Greeks.

DANNY

Who are the Greeks?

CLAIRE

The villains.

PROMISE

Fine. The boys can be the villains then. But you have to listen.

(The boys charge off-stage, shouting.)

BOYS

I want a sword!
We will fight all of you!
Hey! Stop pushing!
You pushed first!

(They're off-stage)

PROMISE

So… we meet everyday. And we think –

GIRL 2

Can this tell my story?

GIRL 3 *(overlapping)*

Can this tell my story?

GIRL 4 *(overlapping)*

Can this tell my story?

(Lights change. BETHANY resumes her spot.)

BETHANY

When we find ourselves face-to-face with fate, who knows what we will do? We are cowards, all.

GIRL

They are cowards too.

BETHANY

They are. But there are more of them. And a pack of jackals is braver than a single lioness.

GIRL

Are we to be slaves then?

BETHANY

I have no idea, girl. I only know that we are ruined.

GIRL

Skipping Forward

GIRL 4

We came through there.

CLAIRE

Perhaps you saw it then. Or where it was.

GIRL 6

And how did the war end?

CLAIRE

They Greeks built a horse. They built a giant wooden horse and said we're giving up.

GIRL 5

They are liars.

CLAIRE

Yes, well… yes they won through lying. The Trojans brought it inside the city – they all celebrated and got falling down drunk – and at night the warriors crept out of the horse and killed them all in their sleep.

GIRL 5

They shouldn't have taken in the horse.

CLAIRE

Right.

GIRL 5

These are the people who wrote the story. The killers.

GIRL 6

They were all killers. Everyone. The Trojans were killers too.

GIRL 5

They were defending their home.

GIRL 2

So who wrote it down, if all the Trojans are dead?

(Lights change back to the play.)

GIRL

I heard the cries.
The singing turned to screams.

They came from their hiding place –
Killing us. Their weapons scarlet with blood.
Headless men in their beds. Never waking. A smile
Of victory on their faces.
Young men. Our brothers. Our friends. Our husbands.

GIRL 4

Look Hecuba. It is Andromache.

(HADIZA enters with the armor of Hector. She is stunned at the carnage. She holds her baby in her arms.)

With her son, the babe of Hector.

GIRL 5

Most sorrowful of all women, where do you go?

HADIZA

Where they take me.

BETHANY

Courage, Andromache –

HADIZA

Courage? My husband had courage. They didn't let me bury him. They strapped him to a chariot and dragged him round the city. His body was torn by the rocks and they tossed him in a ditch. Then they gave me this.

(she drops his armor.)

Did it help you my husband? Your armor and your weapons and your dreams? I am left here with your son.

BETHANY

We must be strong now.

HADIZA

Why?

GIRL 5

Have strength.

GIRL 7

You must have strength!

HADIZA

What do any of you know?! The sorrow is mine.

BETHANY

We all have suffered, but –

HADIZA

You have nothing!

BETHANY

My three sons are dead. Killed by the Greeks. The finest boys –

HADIZA

I'll make a fire and set myself in it.

BETHANY

That is not the way.

HADIZA

Feel the flames on me. Join my husband in the world after this one.

GIRL 2

Please, Andromache!

HADIZA

Driven like cattle. Enslaved to evil men. I will not bear it.

BETHANY

You have no choice but to bear it. Your son needs you.

HADIZA

Better he not grow up than grow up a servant of these dogs.

(DANNY and other boys enter.)

BETHANY

What is it this time? Haven't you tormented us enough?

DANNY

I will not speak with you, woman.

(The men approach HADIZA.)

You are much changed, Andromache. When last we spoke –

HADIZA

Go to hell.

DANNY

This is not my doing. Please, do not hate me.

HADIZA

What do you want?

DANNY

I need your child.

HADIZA

He goes with me. He goes with me to my new master.

DANNY

He will not.

HADIZA

Why?

DANNY

He will never know a master.

HADIZA

What do you mean? Speak plainly if you will speak.

DANNY

He must die.

HADIZA

You cannot mean what you say -

DANNY

Odysseus says he must never become a man. He will seek revenge –

HADIZA

You speak truly?

DANNY

They will throw him from the wall.

(The men step forward to take her baby.)

(ANDROMACHE backs up, prepares to flee.)

Where will you go? Please give him to me.

HADIZA

He's not four months old! He was born in this war!

DANNY

And he will not know of it.

HADIZA

What is wrong with you? An infant? You would kill an infant?!

DANNY

It is not my doing.

HADIZA

You serve him! It is you! If you are the servant of evil you are evil!

DANNY

I am doing what I was ordered to do –

HADIZA

Coward!? You cowards? You think this baby will destroy you? He cannot walk or speak! He cannot hold a weapon! Is this the great threat you see! You mighty Greeks who rule the seas and burn down our city while we sleep?! This is the righteous way dictated by your Gods!

(They grab the baby out of her hands.)

No! No! Give him –

(They push HADIZA away from her baby.)

DANNY

What would you do? Fight us?

HADIZA

I'll kill you myself.

DANNY

One woman? Against an army? Be sensible. We will give his body to you for a proper burial. If you fight his body will be fed to our dogs.

(The other women hold HADIZA.)

GIRL

Andromache –

GIRL 3

He won't know –

GIRL 4

What can you do?

HADIZA

Let me say goodbye at least, or does that frighten you as well?
(They let her approach the baby.)
I thought you would be a king.
You want to hide, little bird? Shelter under my wings?
Don't cry now. You little thing, dearest to your mother,
How sweet the fragrance of you.
Your fingers around mine. I would have loved you your entire life.
Grown proud of you. Cheered you. Seen you grow strong.
My eyes will never behold what you could become.
You are merely a beginning. And there will be no middle.
Let me kiss you a final time.
Your mother cannot save you.
No one can save you.
(They take the baby away)

DANNY

Come now. Take him to the high wall.

BETHANY

Brave men. Brave warriors.

DANNY

I wish it was not this way. I take no joy in these orders.
I am not responsible.
(Lights change.)

GIRL

No one ever is, are they?

PROMISE *(to the audience)*

We put up signs. Come see the show. Our mothers made costumes from what they could scrap together.

CLAIRE

The boys made swords.

PROMISE

Of course the boys made swords.

(MERCY approaches, out of the chorus.)

MERCY

I don't think I will have a costume. My mother has gone to look for work and –

PROMISE

It's okay. We'll find something.

MERCY

I don't want to be a burden on the show.

PROMISE

You aren't. Okay? We'll find something.

MERCY

Can I ask a question? What was the war about? Why were they fighting?

CLAIRE

Pride. The Greek king's wife left him to be with a man named Paris. The Trojans took them in. That's it.

(Lights change back to the play.)

(HADIZA is in the same spot we left her.)

BETHANY

Andromache. Lift up your head.

HADIZA

The gods pile their sorrows on top of me. When the Greeks come back I will force them to kill me.

BETHANY

No.

HADIZA

I'll not give them the satisfaction of living for them.

BETHANY

You won't live for them. You live for you.

(DANNY enters.)

DANNY

His highness, Menelaus.

(JOHN enters with other men.)

JOHN

The sun shines brightly today.
My wife will be returned to me. Ten years gone and finally with her husband once more.
This ordeal is at an end. I came here not for her, of course, but on principle. To repay the wrong done to me by that thief Paris. Men, go into their huts and pull Helen out by the hair. If we have a good wind, we'll be home soon.

BETHANY

Menelaus.

JOHN

What do you want, old woman?

BETHANY

You don't recognize me? I suppose my sorrows have ruined my face as well then. I was Queen here. When the city stood.

JOHN

I know.

BETHANY

I beg you, when they bring Helen out, kill her.

JOHN

No mercy then?

BETHANY

Don't even look at her – if she meets your gaze you'll be entranced again –she brings death and nothing more.

(The men bring out AMIRA, playing the role of Helen.)

AMIRA

You speak against me, Hecuba?

BETHANY

Do it now Menealus. Run her through and rid us of this curse.

Skipping Forward

BETHANY

When we were winning the war, you clung to my son like a vine. You showered him with kisses, you called him a hero. We knew that you were the cause of all of this, that our brave men were dying in the field to support your lust. But your honeyed tongue kept whispering in Paris' ear, your fingers looped into his. Let the men die. Let the Greeks die. Let the Trojans die. Only give me my love. And now you concoct this fable of a magic curse! The only curse began on the day you were born. Menelaus, she is beautiful, but her beauty is matched by her wickedness. Kill her now. Let me watch so that I might have some justice for my dead children.

CHORUS *(overlapping)*

Kill her!
Punish her!
Justice!

JOHN

Helen. You have been unfaithful and deserve the punishment I will give you. My men have stones in their hands. They will deal out justice.

AMIRA

No! Please! I'm on my knees! Please don't! I love you!

JOHN

You are nothing to me.

AMIRA

Then you take up the stone. If you are the wronged man, cast the first stone at me. Bash in my head. But look me in the eyes while you do it.

BETHANY

Don't listen to her.

AMIRA

We could live as if this war never was. Take me home.

(Pause. JOHN looks at AMIRA.)

JOHN

Put her on the boat.

(Cries from the other women)

GIRL 2

Where is the justice?!

GIRL 3

Kill her now, my Lord!

BETHANY

How many of us here have lost our loved ones?

JOHN

You do not rule here! I will take her back with me to Greece and she will meet her fate there.

BETHANY

What fate? You said you would strike her down –

JOHN

And I will!

BETHANY

When she gets on that boat she will seduce you again –

JOHN

Enough! There has been enough blood!

BETHANY

Because it has been our blood! OUR BLOOD! Not yours! You have never spilled enough of our blood! Never in the ten years you waged war for this witch! And now you have –

(The soldiers strike BETHANY and knock her down.)
(The other women rush to defend her.)
(BETHANY gets up.)

JOHN

Let's go.

BETHANY

Cowards! Pigs in the shape of men!

(JOHN stops. Turns around to face her.)

JOHN *(a threat)*

I tore down your city.

BETHANY

At night. While brave men slept. Now you kill infants. You kill women. You kill children. You think a sword makes you strong? You think you frighten me? You have taken everything from me. Take my life if you want.

(JOHN draws his sword – BETHANY takes a hold of it.)

Go ahead then, king. If you have the heart of a man and not the heart of a pig. Do it. Run me through. You've already slaughtered a baby today, why not end the life of an old woman?

(Pause.)

JOHN

You belong to Odysseus. I will not destroy his property.

(He tosses her down.)

(They leave.)

(Lights change.)

PROMISE

Has any of it changed? Has the world grown up since then?

MERCY

Are we the same people?

CLAIRE

I don't know. Maybe that's why we tell the stories. So we know what happened.

BETHANY

Know what?

CLAIRE

What's come before. So maybe people will learn not to do it again. That's what the play is. The people who couldn't speak. The ones who were trampled by the winners. We keep telling their story; it gives us strength.

BETHANY

Does it?

PROMISE

I hope so.

MERY

Will it tell my story?

(Lights change back to the play.)

GIRL

They will carry me away. Over the sea in their ships.

GIRL 2

What will happen to my children?

GIRL 3

My dead husband –

GIRL 4

I hope we die on the way.
The ocean will rise up and destroy us, lightning will crash into the ship – I hope to see the men scattered, bodies everywhere. I long to see them drowning.

(DANNY returns with the body of the baby.)

DANNY

Mother, your child is here.

HADIZA

You mock me. I am no longer a mother. You have seen to that.

GIRL 3

They threw him from the tower as one might pitch a ball.

HADIZA

My child lived when I gave him to you.

DANNY

There are mothers in Greece whose children have died here as well. They cry out for vengeance.

HADIZA

Do they? Can you hear them? Do their voices carry across the broad Aegean? None of us wish our children will find glory in war. We hope they live.

DANNY

This is the way of the world. Some die, some live. If you wish to bury him honorably, I have returned him to you.

End of Excerpt.
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