

He Has a Name

An excerpt from the trilogy "When Swallows Cry" by
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INTRODUCTION

The two key fault lines in the world today are inequality and culture. Inequality in economic means, political power, military strength and the ability to influence worldviews, ideas and values through media houses and creative products with global reach. And, culture with reference to different values, belief systems, traditions and social forms of organisation. The recent global economic recession and the unprecedented movement of people – principally migrants in search of a better, longer life and refugees seeking a safer life – have emphasised these fault lines, as have the responses of various countries and/or its peoples.

When Swallows Cry is a hard-hitting trilogy of playlets that explores the inequities and layered complexities of contemporary global mobility, particularly from African perspectives. Once forced to “migrate” as slaves, Africans are now among the world’s least attractive migrants in the wealthy economies of the world, many built – not insubstantially – on African labour and mineral resources.

SYNOPSIS

When Swallows Cry interweaves three stories set in Africa, or about African migrants and refugees.

One story features a Canadian teacher – initially assumed to be an American – who is captured by a group of bandits in a West African country. He is held for ransom to generate the funds required to develop the region in which he is held.

A second story features two Zimbabwean teachers who flee the economic hardships of their country in a boat heading to Fiji where they will not require visas for at least three months. However, the boat ventures into Australian waters and they are held at a detention centre for illegal immigrants, and are threatened with immediate deportation to Zimbabwe.

The third story – *He Has a Name* – tells of a Somalian who leaves his war-torn country for South Africa, only to experience brutal xenophobic violence that obliges him to seek refuge in America. He obtains a legitimate US visa but is hounded at the port of entry; one of his tormentors is an African America official, a descendant of African slaves, but whose job it is to prevent “undesirables” entering America, and threatening their security.

He Has a Name is the contribution to the Reinventing the Margins project.

The name of the piece is deeply ironic in that human beings who flee their countries in search of better lives are generally communicated as nameless 'refugees' or 'migrants'. Their dehumanisation has the effect of stripping the audience of empathy.

In this piece, it is precisely because the African character has a name that he is hounded and dehumanised, as the assumption is that everyone who goes by that name is a potential 'terrorist'.

HISTORY

Ibsen International, a Norwegian theatre company with a long history of engagement with China, commissioned eight playwrights from around the world to produce new works as part of its New Text-New Stage II project, and to work with the theme of migration which is of increasing political significance globally. The playwrights (three from Europe, two Chinese, one American, a Russian and Mike van Graan from South Africa) met over a period of nine months for a week at a time in three Chinese cities (Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou) during 2015/16, developing their scripts with dramaturges from Norway, Italy and Slovenia, and with Chinese actors, in this unique international project. In the final phase, directors from Hong Kong, Germany and Norway worked with Chinese actors in staged readings of excerpts of the scripts, as part of their further development.

When Swallows Cry was first performed at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg in January of 2017 to critical and audience acclaim.

He Has no Name, one of the playlets in the trilogy, is presented here as a short piece of theatre dealing with the theme of migration.

Setting:

Homeland Security Office, American airport.

It is an entry port to the USA. Official 1 is white, Official 2 is black. Official 1 and Official 2 – both in their early forties – are putting the final touches to their uniforms; they have changed out of their civilian clothes into black trousers, with white long-sleeved shirts. Name tags are attached

to their shirts. Official 2 has a revolver in a holster attached to a belt around his waist. As they tie their shirts, and their belts, they engage in conversation.

Official 2: Are you serious?

Official 1: You'd want your kids to go to school in safety too, right?

Official 2: Everyone would!

Official 1: Exactly!

Official 2: But how do you choose a school that won't be subject to gun violence?

Official 1: If I knew that...

Official 2: Come on, Charles. There are thousands of schools in the country you can choose from.

Official 1: And last year alone, there were shootings at more than sixty of them! Kids, teenagers... killed by some random psycho!

Official 2: By your logic, we wouldn't go to the mall, or restaurants, or even to work...sixty school shootings, but three-hundred-and-sixty mass shootings elsewhere. And that was just last year!

Beat.

Official 1: Bizarre isn't it? We're at the coalface of keeping our country safe from external threats...and we can't guarantee the safety of our kids when they go to school.

Beat.

Official 2: (*wry smile*) Maybe we need to lower the minimum age, so schoolkids can carry guns to protect themselves.

Official 1: Be serious John!

Official 2: It works for us in the real world. The more firepower *we* have, the more of a deterrent we have against being attacked.

Official 1: And when they come at us with passenger planes, trucks, suicide bombers...what use is our firepower then?

Official 2: We do what we always do!

Official 1: And what's that?

Official 2: Find where they come from and bomb them at source!

Official 1 snorts and shakes his head.

Official 2: What?

Official 1: Nothing.

Official 2: Why the snort?

Official 1: (*sigh*) I wish I lived in a gun-free zone!

Official 2: (*his turn to snort*) Then you wouldn't be working here.

Official 1: We don't need guns to do our job.

The phone rings. Official 2 answers.

Official 2: Pwono...Yes, sure. How do you spell that?

He motions to Official 1 who goes to the computer and types as Official 2 spells the name.

Official 2: Surname: S-h-a-r-m-a-r-k-e. First name A-m-i-i-r. (*Beat*) Sure, send him in.

Official 1: Sharmarke... Somalian.

Official 2: Apparently, yes.

Official 1: There are three Sharmarke's on the system, but no Amiir.

Official 2: That's why they're sending him to us.

Official 1: Do they suspect anything?

Official 2: His visa looks authentic, but he got it in South Africa. We've had forged documents from there... They just said we should check him out.

Amiir enters pulling a suitcase on wheels behind him. He has a small bag slung over his shoulder and in his hand, is his passport. He tries to establish a relationship with Official 2 assuming racial sympathy. The attitudes of Officials 1 and 2 change dramatically to professional, distant, firm.

Amiir: They sent me to this office...

Official 1: Mr Shamarke?

Amiir: Yes.

Official 1: Your passport please.

Official 1 takes his passport, studies it in silence. Official 2 stares at Amiir, as he puts on latex gloves. Amiir is clearly uneasy.

Amiir: I have a visa... page 13.

Official 2 approaches Amiir to search his suitcase.

Amiir: What's the problem, brother?

Official 2: This your bag?

Amiir: Yes.

Official 2: You pack it yourself?

Amiir: Yes.

Official 2: So you're aware of everything in it.

Amiir: Of course, brother.

Official 2: Please place it on the table and open it.

Amiir unlocks the case and Official 2 begins to search through it.

Official 1: (*holding Amiir's passport open*) Mr Sharmarke... I need to ask you a few questions.

Amiir: They already asked many questions at Passport Control.

Official 1: I may need to ask some of them again.

Amiir: Is there a problem?

Beat. The tension is palpable as they look at each other.

Official 1: Have you ever been a member of a terrorist organization?

Amiir: What?

Official 1: (*holding up a Quran*) He has a Quran!

Amiir: Is that illegal?

Official 1: I'm going to ask you again...

Amiir: No!

Official 2 pages roughly through the Quran, to see if there's anything hidden in it.

Amiir: (*to Official 2*) Please, brother, that is a holy book...

Official 1: (*cutting in*) So you've never been a member of a terrorist organization?

Amiir: Never! I already answered that when I applied for the visa.

Official 1: Do you know anyone who's a member of a terrorist organization?

Amiir: Why do you ask...?

Official 2: (*ignoring his plea, firmly, slowly*) Do you know anyone who's a member of a terrorist organization?

Amiir: Brother... what is the problem?

Official 2: (*coldly*) I am *not* your brother.

Amiir: I'm sorry... I

Official 2: This is America. *You* are from Africa....

Amiir: I thought you...

Official 1: (*cutting in, getting back to the core business*) Mr Shamarke, it would be easier for all of us – especially you – if you simply answered our questions.

Amiir: But I don't understand. I already answered many questions at Immigration. I went for a long interview and have a visa given by the American Embassy. What is the problem?

Official 1: Our job is to check if there is a problem.

Official 2: Or if you could be a problem in future.

Amiir: What kind of problem?

Official 2: *We* get to ask the questions here!

Beat, tense brief silence.

Official 1: So, you have never been a member of a terrorist organisation and you don't know anyone who is a member of a terrorist organisation?

Amiir: You think I'm a terrorist?

Official 2: (*raising his voice*) Answer the question!

Amiir: (*getting more agitated*) Because I'm from Somalia?

Official 2: (*to Official 1*) He's being evasive.

Amiir: Because I have a Quran?

Official 2: Why are you being evasive?

Amiir: What's evasive?

Official 2: Avoiding the question.

Amiir: (*sighs*) No, I am NOT a member of a terrorist organisation. No, I do NOT know anyone who IS a member of a terrorist organisation! And no, I am not planning to BECOME a terrorist!

Official 1: There are hundreds...maybe thousands of warlords in Somalia...all with their own band of followers.

Amiir: I don't know them.

Official 1: Everyone shooting at everyone else.

Amiir: That's why I come here.

Official 2: To shoot at people here?

Amiir: No! To get away from the killings...

Official 1: Why here?

Amiir: Why America?

Official 2: Why not Kenya? Uganda?

Amiir: I want the American dream. To be free, to live in peace, without guns everywhere.

Beat.

Official 1: South Africa's much closer... you lived there.

Amiir: (*angrily*) They kill Somalis there! They shot my uncle. They killed my cousin.

Official 1: Why?

Amiir: Because they are Somalian.

Official 2: (*snorts*) What... they see Somalis on the street, and they just shoot them?

Amiir: They shoot us in our shops.

Official 1: Why?

Amiir: They say we steal their customers with our low prices. But they don't like to work. They want government handouts. We work hard.

Official 1: (*looking at the passport*) Amiir Sharmarke... your name comes up red on our computers. Why?

Amiir: What does it mean? To come up red?

Official 1: It means... we have a potential problem!

Amiir: What kind of problem?

Official 1: We let you in today, and tomorrow, six months, ten years down the line, we wake up to you strapped in a suicide vest!

Amiir: (*angrily*) That is *not* me!

Official 1: That is what we need to check, Mr Sharmarke. That's our job.

Amiir: I want the freedom and peace that America can give me, but I will give something back!

Official 1: Like what?

Amiir: I have made money in Somalia and South Africa... difficult places. I can contribute to the economy... employ people.

Official 1: We need that.

Amiir: I will help to keep America great.

Official 1 and Official 2 look at each other and smile.

Amiir: My sons will fight to defend America.

Official 1: You have a family?

Amiir: Not yet. But when I do...

Official 1: Do you have military training?

Amiir: No.

Official 1: Have you ever owned a gun?

Amiir: Never!

Official 1: Not even in South Africa... to defend yourself?

Amiir: I've seen what guns do...

Official 2 has been listening all along. He now intervenes.

Official 2: You have a good story, Mr Sharmarke.

Amiir: Thank you.

Official 2: But we need you to strip...

Amiir becomes increasingly agitated during this sequence.

Amiir: Strip?

Official 2: Take off your clothes.

Amiir: What have I done?

Official 1: We need to complete our search.

Amiir: This is *not* good!

Official 1: Mr Shamarke...

Amiir: Why are you treating me like a criminal?

Official 1: This is a standard procedure.

Official 2: Are you hiding something?

Amiir: I've been open and honest...

Official 2: Then take off your clothes...

Amiir: In my culture...

Official 2: Fuck your culture.

Amiir: Why do you swear at me?

Official 2: You're in America now!

Amiir: (*angrily*) I'm a human being!

Official 1 tries to calm things down.

Official 1: Mr Sharmarke... when you go through a metal detector, you have to take off your jacket, your belt, your shoes...

Amiir: Everyone has to do that...

Official 1: Yes.

Amiir: And the detectors have never gone off when I pass through.

Official 1: Then you have nothing to worry about.

Amiir takes off his jacket, his belt and his shoes during the next sequence.

Amiir: But you're treating me like I've done something wrong.

Official 1: Our job is to check that you haven't done something wrong.

Amiir stands with his hands stretched out as required when being searched after passing through a metal detector.

Amiir: Search me.

Official 1: We have to check your body for tattoos. Sometimes they tell us stories...

Amiir lowers his arms, shakes his head. Official 2 crosses to the computer and reads from it. He questions Amiir who stays standing with his hands outstretched.

Official 2: Somalians take their names from their fathers... is that right?

Amiir: Yes. So?

Official 2: So if “Sharmarke” comes up as a problem on our screens... it is possible that you know a Sharmarke who’s a problem.

Amiir: There are lots of Sharmarke’s in Somalia.

Official 2: (*looks at the computer*) Fouad Sharmarke... led an attack on a Mogadishu hotel. Two American AID workers were amongst those killed.

Amiir: That’s why I left Somalia... too much death!

Official 1: Are you related to Fouad Sharmarke?

Amiir: (*frustrated*) I am not related to Fouad Sharmarke. I don’t know Fouad Sharmarke. And I wish he were dead. Are you happy now?

Music interlude, lighting change to signal time has moved on. Amiir is sitting in at the table. Official 1 and Official 2 are downstage right, speaking to each other.

Official 1: What do you think?

Official 2: I think we should squeeze him more.

Official 1: My gut tells me he’s harmless.

Official 2: The tighter we squeeze, the more likely something will come out.

Official 1: What have we got? He’s from Somalia. He has a Quran. And he shares a surname with a warlord.

Official 2: Three strikes! We’ve turned people back for much less.

Official 1: That’s not enough.

Official 2: Our job is to assess the risk. I think we’d be less at risk if he were back in Somalia.

Official 1: You heard what he said. There’s nothing for him in Somalia.

Official 2: That’s not our problem. (*meaning America*)

Official 1: If we refuse him entry, he could turn to hating us. Then he could join the warlords and do damage to us abroad.

Official 2: That still won't be *our* problem... (*meaning Official 1 and 2*). Then it's up to the marines. And the drones.

Beat. Official 1 shakes his head.

Official 1: I hate playing God.

Official 2: That's our job.

Official 1: I love my job... I hate playing God.

Official 2: Sandy Ayala.
Peter Paul Appollo.
Evan Barron.

Official 1: Yes, yes, okay...

Official 2: Everytime I begin to doubt what I do, I recite these names...
Arline Babakitis.
Kermit Charles Anderson.
Joseph Angeline Junior...
We owe it to them not to have another 9/11.

Beat, silence for a while. Official 1 turns around to face Amiir, as does Official 2. As Official 1 speaks, Amiir remains impassive.

Official 1: Mr Sharmarke, for reasons of national security, we are unable to recommend your entry into the United States of America. You will be placed on the next aircraft that has available space to return you either to Johannesburg, your place of departure, or to Mogadishu. We will need to make the necessary arrangements with immediate effect, so require you to make a decision about your preferred point of return.

Beat. Silence. Amiir stares ahead, without looking at either Official 1 or Official 2.

Official 1: Mr Sharmarke...

Amiir: (*quietly, still sitting*) If you were in my position, would you go back?

Official 2: If we were in your position, we'd have no choice but to go back.

Amiir: You're sending me back to my death.

Official 1: Mr Sharmarke, we're returning you to where you came from.

Amiir: I came from places where people like me are killed. Everyday.

During the next speech, Official 2 moves closer to Amiir.

Official 2: (*ignoring Amiir's speech*) I will escort you to a waiting room while my colleague organizes...

Before Official 2 reaches him, Amiir stands up quickly, pointing a revolver at Official 2.

Official 2: What the fuck!

Official 2 goes for his gun, but stops when Amiir points the revolver at his chest.

Official 1: That's my service pistol...

Official 2: You fucking left it in the desk drawer?

Amiir: I am *not* going back....

Official 2: What do you think is going to happen here? That you'll just walk out of here...?

Amiir: (*calmly holding the gun, but his voice quivering with emotion*) I have seen too much death.

Official 1: Mr Sharmarke, you're only making this harder for yourself.

Amiir: I have buried too many people I love.

Official 1: Please just put the gun down. And let's talk.

Amiir: You have made it clear you do not want me here.

Official 1: We are just doing our job.

Amiir: I am not going back...!

There is a tense stand-off in silence. Amiir trains his gun on Official 2.

Official 1: *(stretching out his hand) Give me the gun...*

Amiir steps back away from Official 1. He points the gun at Official 1 who stops walking towards him and then at Official 2, then at Official 1 again, then at Official 2. Finally, he stops, puts the gun barrel inside his mouth.

Fast blackout as a shot rings out.

– END OF PLAY –