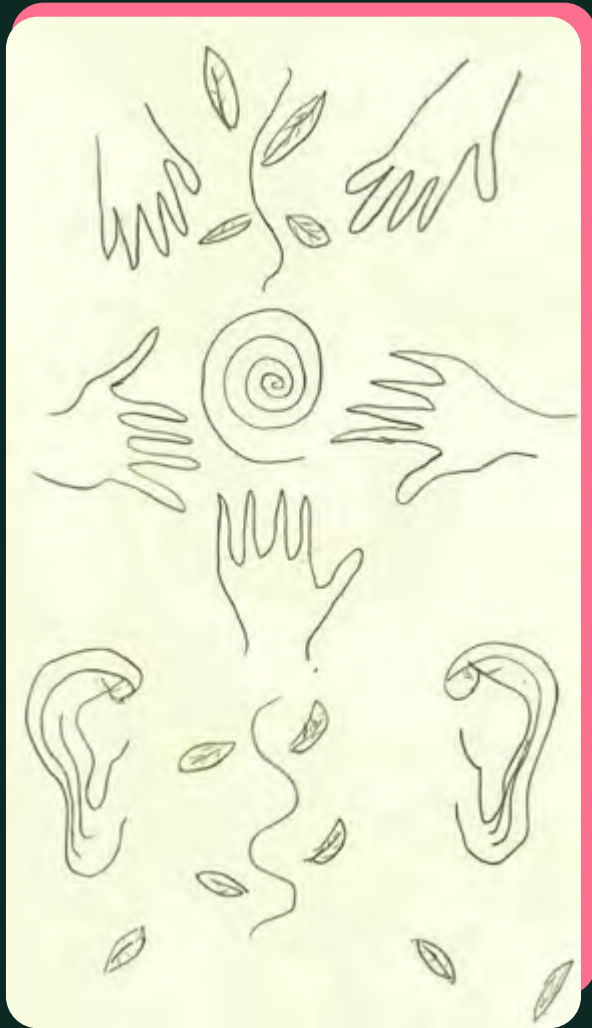




# Het Verhalenhuis

Co-creating narratives for resistance



REFUGEE ACADEMY – INSTITUTE FOR SOCIETAL RESILIENCE  
Sanaz Afshin, Elena Ponzoni and Marene van Holk

# **Het Verhalenhuis**

**Co-creating narratives for resistance**



## Contents

Introduction	1
Refugee Academy, QISSA and ROSE Stories	4
About the authors	5
The performance Het Verhalenhuis	10
Key Insights from the performance	21
<b>On the process</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Project Partners</b>	<b>50</b>
References	52
Colofon	55



(all illustrations are made by Afra Duncan and all photos are by Robin Butter)

## Introduction

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Stories are ways to articulate layered knowledges, wisdom and experience, both individually and collectively. Telling our individual life stories to diverse listeners can provide a creative space for reflection, exploration, and analysis. It can boost our confidence. But storytelling can also become a creative place to create collective knowledge: knowledge that can alter perceptions, and inspire curiosity, but also counter strong dominant images of people or groups, especially in a society permeated by colonial and patriarchal legacies. Personal stories bring back to us the multiplicity of life, against limiting 'single stories' that we often find around us<sup>1</sup>. They show the multiplicity and variety of people's strengths, desires and hopes. They show the layered nature of experiences, roots and identities.

Looking around us, we see continuously how dominant frames of thinking and narratives can support power structures and propagate exclusion, even when the aim is to work towards equality, inclusion and justice. For racialized refugees and migrants, this is particularly visible, when we think of the victimizing (or antagonizing) narratives told in media and political discourse on an everyday basis. Although storytelling initiatives are praised for combating common narratives and dominant images, the question remains, how much space is there to actually listen to stories that do not fit our expectations? Maybe, the art of storytelling needs to be complemented by an 'art of listening', which entails a continuous effort to

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1 See: [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story). See also Halleh Ghorashi's blog on the single stories which trap migrant and refugees into stereotypical images (Ghorashi 2016)

challenge our way of making space (in our art, social or research projects, as well as in our relations, feeling and thoughts) for stories that do not fit our implicit assumptions<sup>2</sup>. This entails, also, engaging with storytellers from a place of care and building reciprocal relations that eventually allow the creation of new collective knowledge.

As appears in the performance described in this booklet, making, creating and listening to stories entails a moral responsibility. It can involve both complicity and resistance to social mechanisms that perpetrate exclusion in our society.

This booklet presents and reflects on the performance *Het Verhalenhuis* (2023), based on the homonymous storytelling project. It shows how theater can help us practice the art of listening and at the same time helps us reflect on the conditions, challenges and limitations of processes of creative storytelling. We wrote this booklet to inspire any reader to explore the connection between social inclusion and theater through this example, but also for those who were part of this project, to remind them of the significance of what they created together. We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to all the participants and theatre makers involved in the project for generously sharing their time and experiences. Without their contributions and insights, this booklet would not have been possible.

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2 This connects with the idea of 'ethical listening' introduced by Tanja Dreher (2009)



## **Refugee Academy, QISSA and ROSE Stories**

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ROSE Stories is a collective of storytellers, producers and talent developers. We focus on innovative stories that often remain untold. We are a creative community that scouts, guides, co-creates and produces. Talent is not just reserved for the happy few, but the opportunity to do something with that talent, unfortunately, often still is. And that is exactly what we want to change!

QISSA (formerly known as ROSE academy, the talent development branch of Rose Stories) not only gives new makers a kickstart, but also offers them an artistic community to draw on and fall back on. As a safe haven and creative incubator, we create and offer space for the development of new sounds and support makers in their process - from concept to film script, web series, theatre performance, book or a presentation at an (art) exhibition.

The Refugee Academy, was initiated by Halleh Ghorashi and Elena Ponzoni in 2017, based at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. It provides an infrastructure to connect academic, professional and experiential knowledge around the position of refugees in society. By developing various lines of research in co-creation with communities and social partners and by organizing thematic meetings with people with lived experience, professionals and researchers, the Refugee Academy aims at increasing the learning and reflective capacities of all parties involved to contribute to inclusive societal structures. Since 2023 the Refugee Academy is part of the Co-Creation for Inclusive Knowledges Lab of the Faculty of Social Sciences, VU.

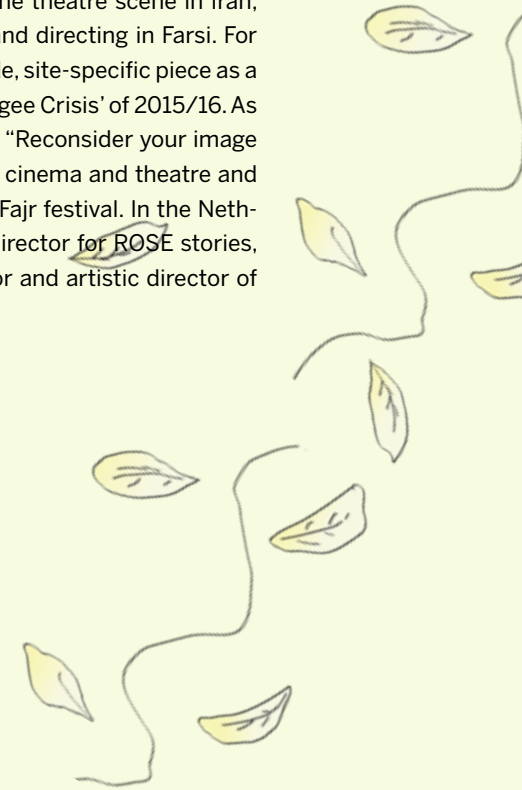
## About the authors

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**Sanaz Afshin** is a PhD candidate at the University of Groningen. In her PhD, she focuses on participatory theatre practices with culturally diverse groups. Her research explores the potential of these practices for both participants and practitioners, while also addressing the challenges involved in creating such performative spaces. She holds a BA in Performing Arts and the Science of Performance, as well as an MA in Theatre Studies, from La Sapienza University of Rome, Italy.

**Elena Ponzoni** is Assistant Professor at the department of Sociology of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. Her work focuses on how the synergy between different types of knowledge can contribute to make visible and change implicit mechanisms of exclusion and inequality. Current topics of her research include the recognition of collective knowledge within refugee communities, and experiences of in-betweenness of young people navigating between different social worlds. Since 2023 she leads the Co-Creation for Inclusive Knowledges Lab of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She has been co-initiator and coordinator of the Refugee Academy and part of the VICI research project 'Engaged Scholarship and Narratives of Change'.

**Marene van Holk** trained as an actress at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama and LAMDA. In 2012 set up her own theatre company Meet Alice with which she created site-specific interactive theatre in London. In 2014 she moved to Tehran to join Virgule as creative producer, director and actor. Inspired by the fertile breeding ground of the theatre scene in Iran, she quickly built up a name for herself acting and directing in Farsi. For Virgule she directed "Green Screen" a promenade, site-specific piece as a response to the heavily reported European 'Refugee Crisis' of 2015/16. As a creative producer she set up research project "Reconsider your image of me". As an actress she has starred in Iranian cinema and theatre and was nominated for a best actress award at the Fajr festival. In the Netherlands she works as a creative producer and director for ROSE stories, QISSA and Dawn Collective and also as an actor and artistic director of Virgule FPAC.



## The storytelling project Het Verhalenhuis

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*Het Verhalenhuis* is a collaborative project initiated by QISSA (formerly known as ROSE Academy part of ROSE stories) and Refugee Academy, aiming to create a safe and inclusive space to share narratives rooted in histories of (forced) migration and home-making. This entailed a two-year project, started in September 2022, to provide individuals with migration background the professional support to bring their untold narratives on stage. The project also included providing a path for strongly engaged participants to become active into the realm of the professional arts sector. In the course of the project, some participants without migration background were included, while border-crossing, liminality and home-making remained central topics. The project consisted of a series of storytelling workshops and served two main objectives. Firstly, the project aimed to provide participants with a space for self-reflection and mutual connections through the use of storytelling techniques and to support them in the development of storytelling skills. Secondly, the project aimed to challenge prevailing narratives surrounding migrants by promoting alternative narratives.

Consisting of eleven Verhalenhuis editions, each edition entailed a series of six storytelling workshops conducted for a group of participants with diverse backgrounds. Each edition took place in a specific community organization or existing network of (forced) migrants and sometimes included people without migrant background connected to the initiative

or community in question.<sup>3</sup> The workshops, led by Soula Notos, covered various storytelling techniques, including the basics of building a story, physical presence and the art of zooming in to vividly portray environments and characters, along with other elements essential for captivating the audience and immersing them in the moment. The workshops of each phase culminated in a final presentation and feedback session with the participants.

Following the completion of three Verhalenhuis editions, all participants were invited to participate in creating a theatre performance based on their personal stories. After having developed their stories in the workshops, as a next step, they were going to share them on a big stage with a wider audience. Six participants joined the performance project, which was directed by Arvand Dashtaray, an Iranian theater maker, and Marene Van Holk, the Dutch creative producer leading all the phases of the Verhalenhuis project. The participants gathered in the first week of April 2023 to embark in three intensive weeks of rehearsals, culminating in the performance, titled *Het Verhalenhuis*, which took place on April 29, 2023, at Theatre Spui in The Hague. A second version of the performance was performed again in the spring of 2024.

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<sup>3</sup> A [list of organizations](#) that collaborated with Het Verhalenhuis project in recruiting participants and implementing the workshop sessions for each phase has been added to the end of the booklet.



In addition to being a creative art project, *Het Verhalenhuis* also incorporated a reflective research component led by Refugee Academy which was meant to strengthen the project's methodology through a critical approach. By this, we mean paying a specific attention to the nuances of invisible power differentials in co-creative projects, understanding the complexities and limitations of storytelling as a tool, and recognizing the importance of learning from the process. This aspect involved systematically collecting the reflections and experiences of both participants and facilitators through dialogue, to gain insights into the project's processes and impacts. Sanaz Afshin, junior researcher from the Refugee Academy working under the supervision of Elena Ponzoni, was actively engaged in the workshop series and rehearsal process and conducted interviews with the participants and creators after the performance. The following represents a condensed summary of the reflections gathered during this reflective process in the first year of the project, with a primary focus on the making of the performance.



## The performance *Het Verhalenhuis*

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### 'Only One Story'

As the audience enters, the stage is in complete darkness and a symphony of sounds fills the air: a mix of different languages. The voices blend and create an enchanting tapestry of sound. Sometimes they harmonize, and other times they compete with each other for attention. The intersecting voices create a sense of anticipation, especially when the language cannot be understood. Eventually, the voices fade away, and the darkness gives way to light.

As the light comes on, the stage is set with eight empty chairs in a line, facing the audience, and two desks on the left and right sides of the stage. The producer, Marene van Holk, sitting on her desk on the left side, steps forward, warmly welcomes the audience and shares her personal experience of living in Iran for nine years, highlighting the value of learning from Middle East cultures. Next, she introduces her husband, Arvand Dash-taray, a theater maker who recently arrived in The Netherlands from Iran and will direct the evening.

It is only at this point that we, the public, are introduced to the nature and theme of the performance: Arvand emphasizes the power of storytelling and reflects on the lack of sustainability and impact in projects where people share their stories, particularly those of migrants. He then introduces the structure of the evening which is about involving the audience in choosing one story among the six presented to be developed further into a movie. Due to limited funding, only one story can be selected. Ar-

vand recognizes the challenges in attracting mainstream attention and expresses his frustration over having to choose just one story. While he hopes to secure sufficient funding in the future to bring all the stories to the big screen, he is currently unable to decide which of the six stories to pursue. Therefore, he seeks the audience's help in determining which story holds the most potential for success.

### **Showcasing and competition**

Marene then invites the participants to the stage, where they briefly state why their story should be made into a film. Each participant shares a sentence highlighting the impact, creativity, dramatic elements, importance, or emotional response evoked by their story. The director then asks the audience to privately write down their choice based on these statements, encouraging them to remain open to changing their minds by the end of the performance.

Afterwards, one by one, each participant takes the stage, sharing their story with the audience. Before they begin, the director engages them in a brief dialogue, asking some questions and requesting a singular gesture that symbolizes the essence of their story. As each participant starts their story, a spotlight illuminates them, while a large monitor behind them displays the participant's name and the story title. Following each story, Arvand and Marene analyze the story's structure using a basic narrative framework, identifying elements such as the hero, the antihero, call to action, conflict, and resolution. As director, Arvand provides suggestions to make the story more attractive for a potential movie adaptation, while also inviting the audience to share their thoughts and potential changes. In this process, Arvand's increasingly provocative suggestions, along with the resulting audience discussions, unveil the underlying manipulation and distortion of the participants' stories. To intensify the competition among participants, they are also encouraged to challenge each other's

stories. Finally, at the end of the suggestions, the public is asked to vote silently for each story by writing a number from 1 to 10 on paper received upon arrival.

### **Rebellion**

In a pivotal moment, one participant, Zouher, rebels against the director, protesting the suggestion of introducing a romantic element to his story. He asserts that this manipulation of their narrative amounts to 'story butchering' and challenges everyone's acceptance of such treatment. This rebellion exposes the audience to the realization that the entire voting process was fake, and the interaction with the director and producer was in fact a performance. At this moment all participants, one by one, come forward and express how they felt hurt and how their stories were being butchered to fit certain narratives.

In their statements, the performers call for a world where all stories are heard and valued for their authenticity and the complexity of lived experiences, free from the pressure to reshape them into success narratives or to romanticize or sexualize them to attract attention. The performers warn against normalizing people's struggles, such as the challenges of forced migration, and urge us to move away from exaggerating cultural differences or adding external conflict to simple and heartfelt stories just to prove they are worth telling. To bring just a few examples of what they share in their statements: 'I wish I didn't need some kind of dancer, success story, for me in order to be heard', 'I wish that war wouldn't have to be romanticized, or one side glorified, in order to make a movie out of it' or 'I wish that cultural differences in my story wouldn't be highlighted in order to make a movie out of it'.

The performers advocate for preserving the truth, depth, and complexity of the stories, while ensuring that those at the center of the story remain

in focus. They remind us that in any effort to bring stories to light, it is essential to let the owners of the stories stand in that light and ensure they are not, in any way, pushed into the shadows or forced to compromise to fit conventional expectations of how their stories should be told: 'I wish I hadn't been invisible ... I don't want to be in shadow again'.

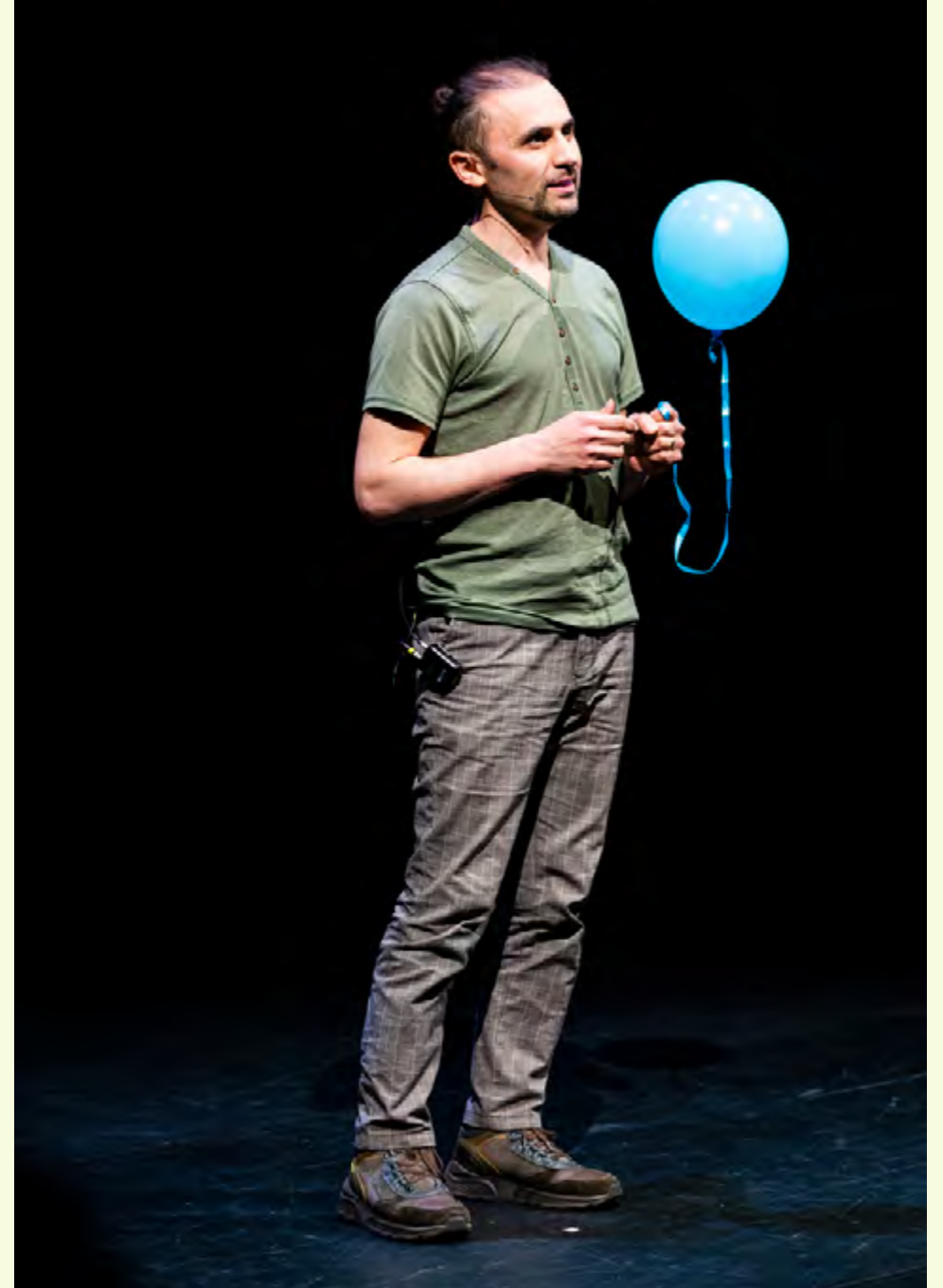
Ultimately, these statements are followed by a final monologue in which one of the participants, Mounia, reflects on the purpose of the performance. She explains that the performance meant to highlight how we are all implicated in perpetuating dominant narratives through our seemingly unimportant decisions and how even a small opinion or judgment, when given without care, can be hurtful.

"We made this performance because we wanted to share what we really encountered on this journey. The complexity of working with real and sensitive stories. Tonight there is no real voting and there is no big prize or winner or blockbuster movies. There's just us with our stories. We chose this structure to highlight how even a small opinion, comment or judgment, when given freely, can be hurtful. It's a way to protest against the way that we have all become so used to the dominant narratives around us, and how we keep feeding them with the small choices we make every day.

These are our stories and we told them in a way we believe in them.

Today we wanted to show that even with the best intentions, for glory or impact, sometime we can lose sight of the essence and the spirit of what we are doing. Sometimes we can lose track of humanity in the way we treat each other. Not only by commenting, but also by staying silent, in the face of injustice."

In this way, the performance emphasizes the importance of our daily decisions, such as the films we choose to watch, the books we decide to read, the individuals we follow on social media, and the stories we choose to listen to.



### **Tableau vivant**

In the final scene, all the participants come together to recreate the gestures they performed before sharing their stories, forming a tableau vivant that visually represents both the significance of each individual story and the interconnectedness of all the stories within the larger narrative of the performance. The director and producer also join them on stage, emphasizing that the performance transcends individual stories to showcase a collective representation of the entire group. As the most theatrical part of the performance, this moment highlights the complicity of the performers. When asked to create gestures spontaneously, the participants were, in fact, acting, as these gestures later return in a choreographed form. In this performance, the group performs in a live event that is constantly influenced by their interaction with the audience while simultaneously being part of a written piece orchestrated by the entire company.

### **A mosaic of stories**

While the fake competition reveals how stories can be distorted for attention, each narrative in this performance is crafted with care to avoid perpetuating stereotypes and to create alternative perspectives. Even in stories centered around war, the struggles of being an undocumented migrant, or the difficult journey of fleeing one's country, the stories or the performances go beyond simple victimhood, to display multiple, layered and contrasting experiences, hopes, strengths, along pain and acts of rebellion, tenderness and love. This resonates with Eve Tuck's call for a desire-based approach to positions and experiences of vulnerability, countering the damage-center approach which is often used in addressing communities seen primarily as marginalized or as victims of injustice (Tuck 2009). In the following, we give an impression of the stories brought in the performance by each performer.

The round of stories begins with **Afra**, who brings together some pieces

of a multi-layered identity narrative. She opens with a mosaic account of her struggle with an unexplained physical pain for years. Through these episodes, she vividly conveys not only the intensity of her pain but also the emotional burden and confusion of not knowing its cause. Her frustration is compounded by feeling unheard by medical professionals. Afra concludes her story with presenting a flag she has created, which incorporates symbols of both her Ghanaian and Dutch roots and represents a visual narrative of her origins, the challenges she has gone through, and the battles she has overcome.

**Sait** tells his story of being forced to leave his country and of the difficult journey he and his family undertook across borders to find a new home. As the story unfolds, we discover that the narrator of the story is a teddy bear, his son's dearest companion to which he confides everything. This creative narrative strategy provides the audience with a fresh perspective on the family's journey, which ultimately leads them to a new home in an unknown country, the Netherlands. As Sait shares his story, he holds a balloon in his hand, which becomes a symbolic element in his narrative – a symbol of his imagination, creativity and resilience that accompanied him throughout this challenging journey.

We then hear the story of **Geert**, a participant without a history of migration, who takes us on his journey to Nepal at the age of 21, where he discovers a new culture. The story portrays an enthusiastic but naive protagonist, unaware of the risks and dangers he might encounter while exploring the world. A near-death experience, being bitten by a snake in the mountains outside Kathmandu, makes him realize how life can change in an instant.



However, when Geert is in shock over the bite, his Nepali companions view the incident as a blessing from God. To them, being bitten by a snake at the source of a holy river, where a statue of a god is also present, is seen as a sacred event.

The story of **Tilak** intertwines his life experiences in both his home country, Nepal, and the new country he has moved to, the Netherlands. He was a former researcher on his way to fulfilling his dreams when he was forced to leave Nepal due to life-threatening risks associated with the caste system. After leaving home due to the discrimination he was facing, the rejection of his asylum application (the validation of his story) puts him back in a similar situation of living in the shadows. Tilak's daughter eventually becomes his motivation to step out of those shadows. Sharing his story becomes a way to raise awareness about what it means to be rightless. Through his story, he claims 'the right to have rights' for himself and many others whose stories have gone unheard.

**Mounia** shares a story from her early twenties, when she faces a challenging decision: to meet the expectations placed on her or to follow her own path, even if it differs from what others expect from her. She chooses the latter and navigates the consequences of that decision, including feelings of uncertainty and concern about disappointing those she cares about. Through her experience, she shows what it is like to encounter these moments of crisis in life and the reality of having to face and work through them, no matter how difficult they may feel.

Finally, **Zouher** shares a story from his youth about an afternoon in 2011 in Damascus when he goes out with a friend looking for fun and excitement. This leads to a series of events, including interrogation and torture. As he tells his story, he shares with us the brutality of the war through the eyes of a young man, who, even in the midst of extreme violence, explores hidden layers of the situation he finds himself in and shares them with us. His nuanced way of seeing each moment makes the story less about who is the victim or which side is right or wrong and more about the hidden layers of human reactions to war.



## Key Insights from the performance

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Although the performance features a variety of stories, each with its unique characteristics, it goes beyond merely evoking empathy. Instead, the performance creates a space to explore the complexities of coexistence among diverse narratives in our contemporary world. An examination of Europe's collective memory of the 2015 so-called 'refugee crisis' shows that refugee narratives within European culture often overemphasize empathy as a means for social and political change (Moenandar and Godioli 2023b, 202). This study notes that European popular culture frequently overlooks Europe's own role in the perceived crisis. Without critical self-reflection on Europe's involvement, the study argues that empathy may provide only a temporary connection and ultimately reinforce the status quo (ibid.).

The performance's ability to move beyond mere empathy is the result of a collective effort by the participants and makers involved in the project, who creatively used their lived experiences and artistic skills to share the wisdom they had gained throughout their life with the audience. Through the stories and the interactive structure, including the Q&A with the performers, the performance brings to light many thought-provoking points that deserve attention. Here, we briefly touch on a few of these insights:

### Challenges of feeling unheard

One of the key issues highlighted in the performance is the challenge of feeling unheard within the complex power structures of society. Whether unheard by medical, migration, or other authorities, this feeling often impacts both physical and mental well-being. The performers offer deep

insights into these struggles, and highlight the confusion and harm that arise when stories are ignored or dismissed. Through their experiences, performers guide us through the journey of confronting this confusion and how it ultimately led them to greater self-understanding and self-compassion. They emphasize the importance of embracing vulnerability and pain as essential parts of life, and illustrate how what they once saw as their 'weaknesses' became the 'battlefields' they have conquered.

The performance also highlights the limited opportunities for those on the margins, such as individuals labeled as 'undocumented', to share their stories. This categorization, problematic in itself, is imposed by states seeking to reinforce their authority by controlling human movement and undermining one of the most basic human rights: the freedom of movement (Nail, 2015, 4). The performance asserts the right of all human beings 'to have rights' and provides insights into how the current migration system fails to include certain groups. A failure that underscores the need for a more effective system. However, instead of adopting creative approaches and innovative solutions, unfortunately, we are only witnessing an increase in restrictive measures, which only results in a more exclusive system that fails to address the complexities and diverse realities of human migration.

### The overlooked agency and resilience

Through their stories, the performers offer insightful counter-narratives around migration and intercultural experiences. They shed light on how the conflict of intergenerational and cultural perspectives between oneself and loved ones can create an opportunity for deeper mutual understanding. Throughout the performance, the stories reveal how chal-



Challenging experiences can become opportunities for personal growth and how individuals use agency and resilience to navigate these difficulties. These aspects are often overlooked in mainstream accounts, particularly in forced migration narratives.

When the performers are asked about the risk of the difficult journey across borders in forced migration journey, they emphasize the courage and agency required to make such a challenging decision. As highlighted by one of the performers, becoming a forced migrant is not a choice but rather an imposition forced upon you. However, when faced with this situation, one can view it as an opportunity to apply everything one has learned throughout life to keep hope alive for oneself and one's loved ones. The agency the performers have practiced in their experiences could become a source of inspiration for audience members facing similar challenges and provide new perspectives for those unfamiliar with such experiences.

### **Pressure to meet conventional expectations**

One recurring theme throughout the performance is the discussion around how to make stories more 'sellable,' which highlights the pressure on individuals to conform their narratives to conventional expectations if they seek greater visibility to their stories. This issue is particularly revealed through suggestions given to the performers on how to enhance their narratives for a film adaptation. For instance, when one of the performers is advised to emphasize cultural differences between himself and the local population in Nepal, justified with the excuse that such elements often attract audience attention, the suggestion underscores a

key challenge in storytelling about contexts from the Global South. This challenge arises from the tendency to excessively focus on cultural differences, which can lead to the exoticization and othering of people from non-European backgrounds.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, when another performer is encouraged to remove some of the traumatic elements from his story because the current version might be too heavy and painful for a movie audience, it highlights a fundamental challenge in refugee theatre narratives. Emma Cox refers to this as the 'victimhood-hope dialectic' (2012, 118). In this dynamic, refugee theatre narratives, when presented for an audience in Global North countries, often feel compelled to integrate elements of hope to make trauma appear more 'meaningful,' 'comprehensible,' and palatable to audiences (ibid., 128). Within this context, hope becomes an 'emotional commodity' used to make the story more digestible (ibid.).

### **The fusion of art and politics**

*Het Verhalenhuis* can be seen as an interesting example of how participatory performance can make visible the subtle processes through which dominant narratives are reinforced. To do so, the performance employs an interactive structure that engages the audience and pushes them to question their own role in perpetuating such mainstream narratives. In this sense, the self-reflective design of the performance recalls Christopher Schlingensiefel's influential project, *Ausländer Raus!* (Foreigners Out!), staged at the Vienna Festival in 2000.

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<sup>4</sup> In their study on peripheral narratives and minority identities, Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar and Alberto Godioli highlight how the differences of minorities are often exoticized, transforming their narratives into a 'spectacle for the majority' to admire, gaze upon, and ultimately commodify (2023, 136).

In response to a right-wing political shift in Austria, Schlingensiefel launched a provocative art installation by setting up a simulated detention center in a central square in Vienna. The installation housed twelve individuals presented as asylum seekers (Schmidt 2011, 28). Modeled after the reality TV show *Big Brother*, the project live-streamed the participants 24/7 and invited both live audiences and online viewers to vote daily to 'evict' two inhabitants. The last remaining individual was promised a cash prize and the opportunity to marry an Austrian citizen to secure legal residency. Each day, spectators had the power to vote off two participants, who were then seemingly deported. Schlingensiefel intentionally kept the audience in the dark about the real outcomes of their votes. *Ausländer Raus!* generated significant public debate, drew large crowds, and attracted extensive media attention. The project was widely praised by critics for its use of performativity and public participation to 'mobilize the public sphere' and to stimulate debates in support of an anti-fascist agenda (Forrest 2008, cited in Schmidt 2011, 28).

In a similar vein, *Het Verhalenhuis* engages its audience by employing a staged competition and actively inviting the audience to intervene in the apparent development and alteration of the participants' stories. Although the audience's involvement in selecting a 'winning story' may seem like a typical moment of interactive theater, the problematic aspect of this involvement lies in the fact that the audience is informed that these are actual experiences of the participants. This deliberate structure prevents audience passivity and places them in a potentially unsettling and distressing position.

Throughout the performance, the spectators actively participated through their votes and opinions, and contributed to the ongoing de-

velopment of the performance. Although they were not allowed to voice their votes aloud<sup>5</sup>, they were writing their votes on their paper. By inviting spectators to express their views, the performance implicitly provided them with the chance to question or even oppose the act of voting on real people's stories. However, such a form of resistance from the audience did not happen, or only to some extent; only one woman stood up, wanting to leave which coincided with the rebellion moment in the performance. Nonetheless, the discussions among the audience about each story's chances of winning could potentially reflect different approaches to narratives in the public sphere and could inspire the audience to reflect on their passive complicity when witnessing (subtle) injustices occurring in society. Even those spectators who disagreed with the competition but chose to remain silent made a consequential decision. By staying silent, they allowed the competition, and thus the manipulation of the stories, to proceed.

Moreover, within the framework of the performance, the presence of the director and producer on stage could create a space to mirror what happens in the public sphere, particularly in the subtle ways stories can be manipulated. Marene, the producer, is portrayed as someone with the experience of living in the Middle East and as someone who deeply cares about non-Western cultural values. Similarly, Arvand, the director, appears an artist with good intentions who genuinely cares about the participants' stories. Yet, despite their good intentions, both persist in offering their suggestions framed as efforts to enhance the participants' narratives. This dynamic allows the performance to show how manipulation can be subtle and may occur even with the best intentions.

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5 This decision was made to prevent performers from hearing any votes on their stories. This was communicated to the audience using the excuse of preventing any influence on the votes of other audience members.

# ON THE PROCESS





## On the process

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In this second part of the booklet, we share some reflections about the process through which the performance was created. Building from the earlier phases of *Het Verhalenhuis* project, we aim to dive into the meaning that this creative work had for participants and makers. These reflections are based on interviews that Sanaz conducted with the participants and makers. What can this project teach us about the role of storytelling and theatre in the life of participants? And what can it teach us about the societal meaning of storytelling and theatre?

From the beginning, *Het Verhalenhuis* has been both a process-oriented and result-oriented project. This has been the case for the performance as well. The theatre makers behind this performance balanced their focus on both the process and the end result, ensuring attention to the final performance while also considering what the whole group could gain from the experience.

### Directing and facilitating team

*Het Verhalenhuis*, as a performance, emerged from an exchange of expertise between three practitioners, and a group of participants who contributed their own knowledge and insights through their lived experience and active involvement in shaping the performance. The directing and facilitating team included: Soula Notos (the workshops facilitator), Marene Van Holk (the creative producer), and Arvand Dashtaray (the director of the performance). Soula Notos who guided the storytelling workshop sessions has a Greek background and was born and raised in the Netherlands. She is a theatre maker, storyteller, comedian, and performer, and her work focuses on themes such as equality, freedom, empathy, and connection. Her productions include *Doctor, what do cowgirls dream about?*, *Homesick, Who are you when no one is looking?* and *Gurbet – or how I became rich*.

Her approach to storytelling can be seen as a way of using storytelling as a tool with the potential to create opportunities for deeper connections between people. For her, this potential emerges in moments of connection between the storyteller and the listener. These moments occur when both storyteller and story listener are engaged in the shared experience of storytelling: walking through the same story together, hand in hand, and exploring the nuances behind what drives people's actions. To facilitate this connection, Soula emphasizes the need for storytellers to be fully present in the moment and connected to what they are sharing, while also establishing a meaningful bond with the audience as story listeners. In her view, these shared experiences offer opportunities to find common ground and gain a deeper understanding of the human condition we all share.

The director behind the performance is Arvand Dashtaray, an Iranian theatre director whose experimental approach has interesting layers to discuss. Observations of the performance rehearsals, along with an in-depth conversation between him and the junior researcher, allowed us to explore more deeply some of the underlying principles that drive his



work. Within the realm of applied theatre, as seen in the work of Augusto Boal and many others, theatre functions as a social tool to establish a platform for uncovering and exploring ideas and emotions – a space for sharing and connecting (Gatt 2020). This pursuit of connection and Dashtaray's belief in the potential of applied theatre to foster meaningful human bonds are central themes in his work.

One can say that both in the rehearsal journey (the experience he aims to create for his performers) and in the performance space (the experience he seeks to create for his audience), he is pursuing the same goal: a search for connection, or, as he puts it, 'genuine human connections'. In his rehearsal space, his aim is to engage participants on a journey toward a deeper connection with their bodies and emotions. To this end, he designs a variety of exercises, including both verbal and non-verbal techniques, to create space for participants to explore their emotions, bodies, and stories on a deeper level. Here, his approach is focused on creating a space where participants feel free to dare, connect, explore, and experience. In the performance setting, this search for connection is reflected through his theatrical research towards a form of theatre which can directly connect with the audience, beyond the traditional role of an audience sitting in the dark. Here, his aim is to engage the audience in the journey of becoming part of a collective reflection or a collective dialogue on a specific aspect of contemporary social structures.

Having explored various theatrical forms, Dashtaray's current approach centers on using theatre to create spaces for reflection on the often overlooked or hidden social and cultural layers of contemporary human life. In the rehearsal space, this goal is evident through his consistent effort to link his theatrical exercises with everyday life. This approach invites participants to reflect on how they navigate their daily lives, how they use their bodies, and how they confront their everyday challenges. In the per-

formance setting, this aim is reflected through a blend of lived experience and fictional elements, which turn the performance space into a kind of public forum and create a space to challenge or question normalized patterns. These are patterns that may appear natural or invisible, but are problematic or inhumane.

Dashtaray's direction of the performance was complemented by Marene Van Holk, a Dutch actress and director, with a shared commitment to exploring migration and identity in her work. As the first initiator of *Het Verhalenhuis* project, Van Holk brings a unique perspective shaped by her firsthand experience of living in both European and Middle Eastern cultures. Her approach stands out for its balanced emphasis on the value of what can be gained through the process of applied theatre, and the aesthetic quality of the final production, ensuring that both the process and the product possess their own strengths. Her work reflects the urgent need to address cultural misunderstandings and the complexities of the experience of migration. In 2015, during the so-called refugee crisis in Europe, Van Holk created the site-specific promenade performance *Chroma Key* in an old bathhouse in Tehran, where the audience experienced a reconstructed journey of illegal migration between Turkey and Greece.

The shared artistic journey of these two artists, Dashtaray and Van Holk, began in 2011 at the Spoleto Theater Festival, which led to collaboration between their theater companies. Their shared mission is to use theatre as a medium to shed light on the complexities of intercultural misunderstandings and a platform for dialogue, value exchange, and mutual learning and reflection across cultures. Their first joint project, a performance titled *London, Rome, Tehran, Amsterdam Reconsider Your Image of Me*, was staged in 2014 in Tehran and focused on the complexity of the image of the 'other'. It explored the extent to which our perception of the 'other'

is based on our imagination and fantasy, and to what extent is grounded in reality.

### From storytelling workshops to rehearsals

The participants of this performance began their journey with storytelling workshop sessions, which covered various topics, such as the basics of building a story, and presenting it to an audience. The focus of these sessions was on helping participants develop their stories into presentable structures and learn to connect with their audience by vividly picturing what they are narrating and maintaining presence, confidence, and energy in their storytelling. In addition to various storytelling exercises, the sessions included physical exercises, icebreakers, and interactive activities designed to encourage active participation and foster a sense of community and trust within the group.

These workshops deepened our understanding of the critical role of the facilitator in creating a safe and supportive environment for participants. An interesting approach was the choice by Soula (the facilitator) of beginning workshops by narrating a personal story about herself. This practice extended to all of us involved. Whether we were present as participant, creative producer or as researcher, we all shared our stories. This was key in establishing meaningful connections, as sharing stories with each other disrupted roles and vertical relations allowing more horizontal exchanges. A significant element of these workshops was the continuous collaboration between Soula and Marene, the creative producer. Throughout the process, they were both always committed to learning from the process, regularly checking in, and reflecting on their progress, goals, and how to improve the methodology. This ongoing exchange played a key role in enhancing the overall experience of the workshops.

The participants who took part in the performance joined from different phases of the project and did not know each other, so building trust and relationships within the group was crucial to the success of their collaborative work. Lasting only three weeks, the rehearsal process was a relatively short period for forming connections and developing a stage performance. The rehearsal sessions began with bodily exercises aimed at helping participants experience their bodies in new ways. Here, movement was used to enhance self-awareness and facilitate communication with oneself and others. These exercises including various walking techniques, vocal liberation exercises, and explorations of non-verbal communication such as eye contact were designed to offer a crash course in performance skills and to encourage participants to view their physicality and emotional states from a fresh perspective.

The rehearsal's focus on bodily experience proved valuable for providing participants with an opportunity to become more attuned with their physical selves. One participant emphasized the importance of these exercises for encouraging reflection on how they use their bodies: 'you have to really feel the feeling and sensation within different parts of your body'. Another participant reported that through this experience, she became more present in her body. She shared that while working on her story and structuring it, she developed a deeper appreciation for her body: 'I became more thankful'. She explained that she realized her body had supported her throughout various phases of her story, which led her to feel more gratitude for her body's resilience. She shared that she became aware that her body was 'not just a vessel, but something that did a lot of work and held a lot of stress'.

Beyond physicality, the rehearsals served as a platform for self-reflection, prompting participants to reflect on their manner of speaking, walking,

and even thinking. This journey of self-exploration, facilitated through bodily and emotional expression, allowed them to experiment with new ways of communicating and presenting themselves to the world. Additionally, the intention was to create a space for participants to delve deeper into their stories. Through a Q&A session in the rehearsal sessions, participants asked each other questions to explore their motivations for sharing their stories with the public. This was challenging but also fruitful, leading to profound moments of self-reflection. During these sessions, participants assisted each other in exploring different aspects of their stories, understanding various characters within their narratives, and uncovering the deeper motivations behind their decision to share these stories in the performance. Sometimes, this exploration enriched their understanding of their own stories, while other times it led them to consider changing their stories or finding entirely new ones.

The process of finding a new story proved to be a challenging journey in itself. Selecting a single story to share requires deep reflection on one's past, as we all possess countless stories to tell. The following quote from a participant who faced the pressure of finding her story illustrates this struggle:

"I found it very difficult. It was nice also, but I found it also difficult to find my own story ... which story am I going to tell and in what way? That I found also very difficult to, to come up with a way to tell the story. So ... I had some sleepless nights over that, to be honest. Yeah. ... I think it did change me in a way."

The rehearsals provided a space where individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, including native, migration, and forced migration experiences, could practice understanding each other despite their difference perspectives and life experiences. Spending four hours daily over three intensive weeks, coupled with the collective pressure of creating a show, deepened the group's connections. To enhance this, the director and producer focused on creating moments that encouraged profound conversations and connections. Sharing Iftar meals together, in particular, played an interesting role in strengthening relationships within the group.

Throughout the creative process, both the theatre makers and participants valued building a sense of community and trust that extended even beyond the rehearsal space.

The formation of this energy and trust can be attributed firstly to the participants' 'willingness to be vulnerable' and their courage to place trust in the process. Secondly, it can be attributed to the theatre makers' commitment to critical thinking, avoidance of simplistic solutions, and their continuous efforts to promote collective decision making during the creative process.

Despite the high pressure of performance creation, the group showed remarkable resilience and maintained their unity throughout the process. While the performance itself was very successful, the team's equally significant achievement was their commitment to learning from every stage of the process and from one another.

### Motivations for sharing stories

Participants were motivated by a range of factors when it came to sharing their personal stories. One compelling reason was their belief in the power of storytelling as a bridge to connect individuals from native backgrounds with those who had experienced forced migration. One of the participants highlighted an important point. He noted that there is a common belief that asking refugees about their stories might remind them of painful memories and make them uncomfortable. For instance, he observed that at work, many people avoided asking him about his story for this reason. Yet, for him, sharing his story is a way to foster mutual understanding and reduce misconceptions and misunderstandings between people. Although this precaution might be appropriate in other cases, this participant noted that it might also prevent those who are eager to share their experiences from doing so, and lead to missed opportunities for meaningful conversations.

Another driving force behind participants' decision to share their stories was the desire to raise awareness about specific issues. For instance, they aimed to shed light on the challenges faced by those living on the margins of society, feeling unnoticed and unheard. For these participants, the decision to share their experiences was rooted in their aspiration to shape a more potent narrative for future generations, particularly their own children. By witnessing their parents' determination and being inspired by their ability to break free from adversity and illuminate their lives, as well as the lives of others facing similar challenges, children could find influential role models. The aspiration to become role models for their children became a compelling force that drove participants to share their stories and actively pursue meaningful change.

### Being on the stage: a complex experience

Based on what participants shared with us, sharing personal stories on the stage facilitated valuable connections across different cultures and experiences, within the group and with the audience. Participants discovered that their narratives resonated with others, regardless of their backgrounds. One participant shared how sharing her story, despite initially doubting its significance, helped her realize the relevance and importance of her story for others. Post-performance, audience members approached her, expressing how her story had inspired them and transformed their perspectives. From this perspective, the performance served as a dynamic platform for cultivating empathy, deconstructing stereotypes, and nurturing mutual understanding.

However, looking at the experience of participants, more than anything, showed us the complexity of the space that can be created in such projects. Taking the stage to share their stories evoked a range of emotions within the group, empowerment, excitement, pride, yet also triggered moments of doubt about their stories' resonance with the audience. This showed us that even within a creative and interactive performance like *Het Verhalenhuis*, which challenges the audience, the act of sharing personal stories might create the impression that the audience listens only to fade away afterward. Thus, the project evolved into an opportunity to show how participants might experience uncertainty about whether the essence of the story was truly grasped. This sentiment experienced within this project aligns with the inquiries that have surfaced within the refugee theater narrative, concerning the audience's responsibility: How can an audience 'ethically' engage with a refugee narrative, and what responsibilities do they bear after hearing it?

Various scholars in the realm of refugee theater narratives have brought up these criticisms. Alisson Jeffers claims that despite refugees who share their stories on stage (or any other platform) are already aware that sharing their story in front of an audience will probably not lead to any sustainable material change in their political and social situation, the audience's act of listening involves 'a form of commitment' (2012, 307). This prompted us to inquire: What are the prerequisites for transforming the act of listening into a genuine commitment rather than passive emotional consumption? And taking a step back, we should once again ask, what should this commitment entail? Drawing from what participants shared with us, we have come to understand that while participatory theatre can create a valuable space for individual reflection and heightened awareness, its limited ability to bring about tangible change in participants' lives can at the same time result in feelings of frustration and disappointment. One of the participants for instance shared the confusing feeling of transitioning from the stage, where he had a powerful experience of performing for an audience of nearly 80 members, to his everyday life: 'I was on the stage and then in the shadow again'.

The fact that theatre does not hold the potential to drive significant structural transformations is a notable limitation of the medium that needs consideration when devising such projects. This observation closely resonates with findings from Huma Saeed's study on an applied theatre experience involving Afghan women (2015). Saeed highlights a potential disparity between the macro and micro impacts of applied theatre projects and underscores that while applied theatre may facilitate awareness and empowerment at an individual level, it may not substantially alter oppressive social structures or improve living conditions (ibid., 25).

This mismatch can result in disillusionment and heightened suffering within marginalized communities.

Therefore, both based on Saeed's insights and our own experience, we believe that the inherent constraints of participatory theatre projects in terms of generating structural change and the potential emotional repercussions for certain participants should be thoughtfully taken into consideration. It's crucial to be mindful about the feelings that might be created for participants. Participatory theatre creates a space full of potentiality, but with its own challenges and limitations.

### The Emerging Theatre Group

Overall, considering the rehearsal's brief duration, the group managed to form a meaningful bond that had the potential to grow even stronger in future collaborations. The main objective of the group in creating this performance has been to establish an inclusive environment and produce a genuine work through critical thinking and co-creation. Participatory theatre is designed to facilitate a 'dialogue' between 'an artist or team of artists with expertise in theatre-making' and 'participants and/or audiences with expertise in their own experiences, lives, and concerns' (Snyder-Young 2013, 3). This exchange of expertise, despite all the limitations and challenges, allowed the collaboration within the group to continue after the premiere of the performance. Due to the success of the first performance, the group reconvened a year later, touring The Hague in May and April 2024, with a second version entitled *De Verhalenslager*. Having already created their own manifesto, the group is now finding its own way

to continue as a professional theatre company.

Their collective mission emphasizes fostering personal developments, celebrating pluralism, and creating space for diverse, polyphonic stories that highlight the human experience. By encouraging different perspectives and giving everyone a voice, they aim to facilitate meaningful interactions and responses to diverse narratives. Their commitment to impactful and diverse storytelling seeks to build connections and understanding, highlight underrepresented perspectives, and help individuals gain strength and self-confidence through recognition of their stories. In our polarized world, this group's efforts to shed light on the complexities of interacting social forces offer hope for a future where bias and fear of mutual interactions are gradually replaced by dialogue and collective critical thinking. From this viewpoint, their work embodies what Bill McDonnell describes as 'theatre of dialogue': 'the only theatre which will change the world is a theatre of dialogue, based on a radical humility; that we rise or fall together' (2005, 67).

### **Marene van Holk, Creative Producer Verhalenhuis for QISSA**

This project was invaluable for me personally. I had just returned to the Netherlands from living in Iran for the past 9 years and having been enveloped in a different culture. It was a great comfort to me personally to be around people who also somehow missed somewhere and had experienced a different way of doing things. I feel like I have personally grown hugely from hearing so many stories from such a variety of people, I've become kinder and more sensitive and I've grown to value my own stories more too. All in all it was such a joy for me being at the helm of this project. Seeing the participants shine in the final presentations of the workshops and on another level on stage during the performance filled me with so much joy. I feel like we all grew from taking part in this journey. The most rewarding was seeing how much courage everyone gained from each other and how open everyone was to really push ourselves and the performance to be the best it could be. It also made me feel proud of myself - one of the questions that Soula Notos always started her storytelling workshops with - "what are you proud of?" I feel proud that we could really create a space where every emotion, doubt, thought and issue could be shared and a space where everyone's voices counted. I also think one of the reasons that this project was such a success was because of the personal connection and likemindedness we had amongst the team and the partners. I clicked immediately with Soula Notos, the workshop leader, we became friends and it always felt that we could brainstorm together on how we could improve. The collaboration with Refugee Academy was also so valuable for me. Sanaz Afshin gave me so much confidence to produce this project because of all the research and knowledge she shared with me about previous/similar initiatives. She gave me the confidence and tools to continuously reassess blindspots, complex dynamics and question the impact and sustainability of the project. This partnership with

Elena Ponzoni (and later on with Diana Bachour) meant that I pushed further for attaining the circumstances that I deemed necessary for the project to succeed. Similarly I quickly built up a personal connections with (most of) the project partners such as Fatma Aktas and Emmylou Aben, Karen Wuertz and Ingeborg Dennesen (and later on Mollynn Mughisha, Djadi Loose, Elly Hajian, and Manijeh Tafakkori) which was key in inspiring and motivating the participants in the first stage and in creating a warm space for the workshops. I also was just so impressed and inspired by all the incredible work they do with their organizations. Working together with director Arvand Dashtaray was also a joy, as I think he has the unique ability to connect with people and make them feel safe to push themselves to get the most out of themselves; to harness the power of theatre that both makes everyone feel included and heard and holds the highest artistic quality possible.



### Arvand Dashtaray, Theatre Director

In my own practice, I have found that the integration of lived experiences and personal narratives into the performance process not only creates impactful and authentic performances, but also serves as a catalyst for personal and social change. By valuing every individual's story and creating a space where these stories can be shared and celebrated, applied theater becomes a powerful tool for amplifying marginalized voices and fostering inclusivity. This has led to the empowerment of individuals who have found their own agency and voice through the process of engaging with applied theater.

Additionally, the sense of community and connection that is fostered through the collaborative nature of applied theater has been a source of inspiration for me. Witnessing individuals from diverse backgrounds coming together, breaking down barriers, and engaging in meaningful dialogue has reinforced my belief in the transformative power of the arts.

As I look towards the future, I am deeply committed to continuing my work in applied theater, creating spaces that nurture personal growth, empowerment, and social change. I am dedicated to advocating for the value of storytelling and lived experiences, recognizing them as essential components of creating a more empathetic and inclusive society.

In conclusion, the impact of applied theater extends far beyond the boundaries of the stage, reaching into the hearts and minds of individuals, and catalyzing positive change in our communities. I am honored to be a part of this journey and look forward to continuing on it.

### Participants' reflections

#### Afra:

It was amazing and very difficult. I have learned so much about myself. What I loved about it was the community feeling. It is really interesting to see people with all kinds of different personalities coming together. I do feel that there was some pressure for myself and amongst the group at times, but I have learned that the pressure makes it worthwhile. Working so closely with Geert, Mounia, Arvand, Zouher, Marene, Sanaz, Sait and Tilak created an intimate connection. Like they say; "Without pressure there would be no diamonds". It made me feel extra alive, hearing each other's stories and making space for our shared humanity. In this way you carry one another I feel and hope. What I found difficult is sharing my own story so publicly and seeing all the feelings and thoughts that surrounded this story. In a way being part of this project was really like looking in a mirror. Who am I, how do I react in certain situations and what can I try to change about this? Working on this play was really helpful to make this a bit more clear for myself. I am thankful to everyone for carrying me in this process and sharing the laughs and the cries. We made a beautiful show and project and I will take this experience with me for the rest of my life.

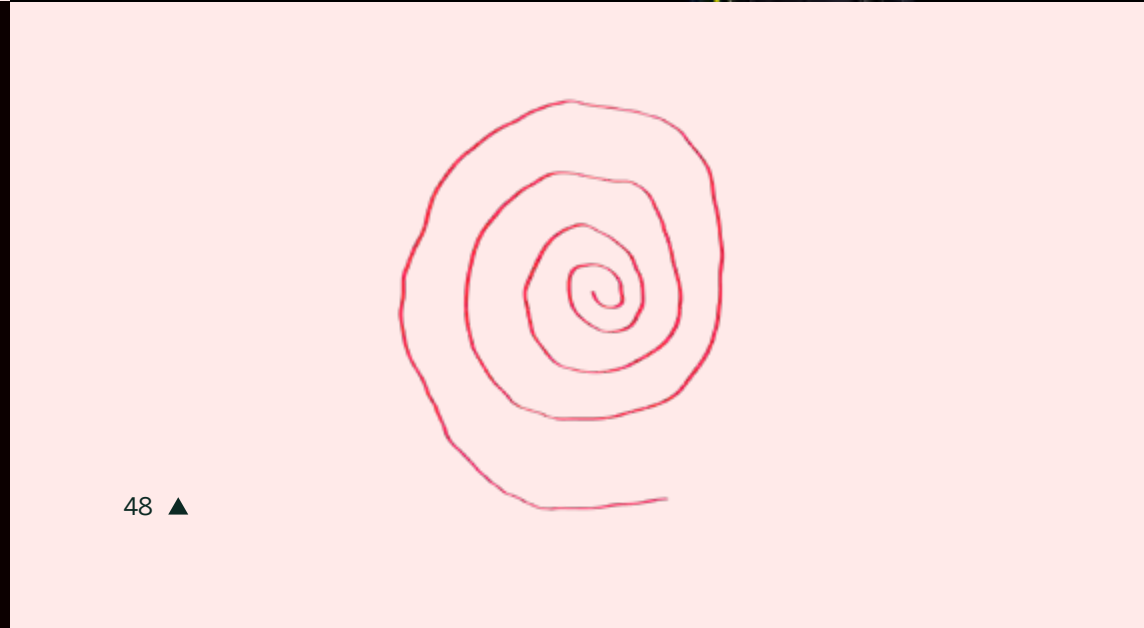
#### Sait:

People from diverse backgrounds come together to co-create stories. In our theater, we don't just tell stories; we weave them together. This creates a vibrant tapestry where every voice and experience plays a part. Together, we craft a rich performance that showcases the diversity of our community and richness of our human experience.

**Geert:**

Participating in *Het Verhalenhuis* has been a milestone experience. Initially I never expected that I would enjoy performing and storytelling so much! Working together towards the show, being on stage, and the adrenaline after the show are simply inexplicable. I'm so grateful that I have been given the opportunity to experience all of this.

The period that we got to know each other during the rehearsals are perhaps one of the memories that I cherish the most. I strongly felt how we engaged by sharing our stories, talents and unique personalities. Our different backgrounds definitely contributed to the uniqueness of this group and the quality of our show.





## **Project Partners**

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At each phase, *Het Verhalenhuis* project collaborated with a local institution or organization that contributed by creating a group of participants through their networks and, sometimes, by providing space for workshops and the final presentation. Establishing effective partnerships with partners proved to significantly contribute to the effectiveness of the workshops. Partners served as the initial point of contact with participants, and their approach played a significant role in creating trust among participants. Clear communication with partners was crucial, as it could ensure that partners have a clear understanding of the project's goals. This helped prevent misunderstandings and conflicts. Overall, active involvement of partner organizations in participant recruitment, preparation, and support has been highly beneficial.

### **2022/2023**

Justice & Peace  
Avrasya  
Pitztop

### **2023/2024**

Stichting de Vrolijkheid & AZC Katwijk (COA)  
African Cultural Promotion Centre  
Here To Support  
Wereldhuis  
Podium Noord & Wijkz  
Theater de Regentes & Wijkz Segbroek/De Luifel

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## Colofon

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