

# How 3 Actors Overcame Trump's Travel Ban to Take the New York Stage

By Michael Paulson

Dec. 2, 2018

“The Jungle,” a new British play about a French refugee camp, was an obvious candidate to transfer to New York: critically lauded, commercially successful, timely and talked about.

But it had one big problem: Three of the 17 people in the London cast were citizens of predominantly Muslim countries whose residents have been barred by President Trump from traveling to the United States.



The play centers on a refugee camp in Calais, France, known as the Jungle. Several cast members, including Mr. Moradi, center, lived there for time. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

The show's creative team and producers were reluctant to move the play without all the cast members, saying their life experiences — several had lived in the Calais refugee camp being depicted — gave the show its authenticity. But trying to get two Iranians and a Syrian into Trump-era America to perform a drama that is inherently sympathetic to refugees was, to put it mildly, daunting.

“The odds were against us,” said Stephen Daldry, who is directing the play alongside Justin Martin. “We knew it was going to be a challenge.”

Over several months, a coalition of celebrities (including Sting and Benedict Cumberbatch), religious leaders (the former archbishop of Canterbury) and politicians (the mayors of New York and London) joined forces in an effort to persuade the administration to grant the actors a waiver from the ban.

## THE SUMNERS



04 September 2018

Mr. Jeffrey Vick  
Chief of Visa Services  
U.S. Embassy  
33 Nine Elms Lane, London  
SW11 7US, UK

Dear Mr. Vick:

We respectfully write to you in our capacities as leading international artists working in the music, film and entertainment industries around the world, regarding *The Jungle*, a British theatre production currently playing in London, and which is due to transfer to St Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn this winter.

Having first seen the play during its initial run at the Young Vic Theatre in January of this year, we have since followed its progress closely and taken a keen interest in the development of the groundbreaking companies and artists involved in bringing it to life.

It is without doubt a seminal piece of theatre with significant artistic merit and national importance, representing the cutting edge of theatre being made in the world today. No play this century has struck a chord with audiences as much as the *The Jungle* has during its run in London. We are also in no doubt that the artistic philosophy, style and success of the piece depends on the unique and irreplaceable group of actor-creators who perform it every night. The production was built by and around them.

It is our firm belief that the artistic community of New York theatre and their audiences would be greatly enriched by the opportunity to experience it. The play discusses and confronts issues and stories that are largely unreachable outside the world of art, and even within it this is a subject that is too often simplified and reduced, the real complications ignored. *The Jungle* will be a chance for New York audiences to understand more deeply the realities of the life of the characters the play depicts, in an extraordinary and immersive way.

We respectfully request that the Department of State waive the restrictions of Presidential Proclamation 9645, and approve O-2 visas for Mr. Taha Haj Ahmad, Mr. Ghobsheh, and Mr. Moradi, under the provisions outlining the National Interest Waiver.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Sting and Trudie Styler

In a letter to American Embassy officials, Sting and his wife, Trudie Styler, argue that “no play this century has struck a chord with audiences as much as ‘The Jungle’ has during its run in London.”

Of course, there was contingency planning: An Iranian-American actor, Arian Moayed, was quietly flown to London and intensively rehearsed for a key part (he even went on one night in the ensemble) so he could replace one of the refugees in New York if need be.

And then there was a zany-seeming gamble: After one of the Iranians was initially rejected by the State Department, the producers decided that, rather than try to persuade the United States to admit the Syrian actor, they would endeavor to expedite his British citizenship, thinking that would be an easier path to New York.

It worked. All three performers — Ammar Haj Ahmad, the Syrian refugee who successfully became a British citizen, and two Iranian refugees, Moein Ghobsheh and Yasin Moradi — were ultimately granted employment visas by the State Department, made it through airport security (Mr. Moradi was held for hours of questioning because he had once been fingerprinted while fleeing across Serbia) and are now happily rehearsing in Dumbo, Brooklyn.



Stephen Daldry, who co-directing “The Jungle,” overseeing rehearsals in Brooklyn. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

“I still can’t believe I’m in America,” said Mr. Ahmad, 36, who was trained as an actor in Syria before seeking asylum in Britain, where all three men live now. “It’s bizarre that we live at a time when you need all this work to get one person to another country, and amazing that it happened. But I also feel very privileged, because every day I’m here, I think about the millions of people who can’t go from one place to another.”

“The Jungle,” cast intact, will start performances Tuesday in anticipation of a Dec. 9 opening at St. Ann’s Warehouse, a prestigious and globally minded nonprofit theater on the Brooklyn waterfront. The show has an immersive set — audience members sit in a replica of an Afghan cafe at the camp, and post-show performances and talks will be held in the same geodesic dome that was used by the show’s writers, Joe Murphy and Joe Robertson, when they established the Good Chance Theater at the camp in 2015. The play is scheduled to run for eight weeks, which will make it the longest-running show in the theater’s history.

Mr. Ghobsheh, a 23-year-old songwriter and musician who is now using the first name Milan, and Mr. Moradi, a 26-year-old kung fu practitioner who competed on the Iranian national team, were both discovered by the theater in the Calais camp, known as the Jungle. Mr. Moradi, who is Kurdish and said he fled Iran because it had become increasingly difficult for his people, started teaching kung fu to other refugees in the Jungle, and then began performing as an actor. He said he believes in the power of the play. “I think it is going to be helpful to show our story,” he said.





MAGDALENE COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE  
The Master's Lodge

31 August 2018

Mr. Jeffrey Vick  
Chief of Visa Services  
U.S. Embassy  
33 Nine Elms Lane,  
London  
SW11 7US, UK

Dear Mr. Vick:

I am currently Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge, Chancellor of the University of South Wales, Chair of the Trustees of the international development charity, Christian Aid, and Patron of RADIUS, the Religious Drama Society of Great Britain. I have been regularly involved in recent years with the campaign to secure safe and legal solutions to the challenges faced by refugees who are legal minors.

In my professional capacity, I confirm that I am familiar with the theatrical production, *The Jungle*. I write to express my support of its upcoming production at St. Ann's Warehouse, in Brooklyn, New York, and attest that it has both substantial merit and national importance. It has been recognised by critics of very diverse political persuasions as a deeply serious and groundbreaking piece of theatre. It is not a propagandist play in any narrow sense, but a brilliantly innovative and imaginative evocation of the complexities of the refugee crisis as represented in the camp at Calais. It has been very widely – I think almost universally – praised for its theatrical verve and creativity, its moral subtlety and its emotional depth. Along with many critics, I think it is one of the most significant pieces of drama on the London stage at present, a genuine national event. I believe that the planned production in New York will likewise be a profoundly significant event for the US cultural world.

Accordingly, I respectfully request that the Department of State waive the restrictions of Presidential Proclamation 9645, and approve O-2 visas for Mr. Taha Haj Ahmad, Mr. Ghobsheh, and Mr. Moradi, under the provisions outlining the National Interest Waiver.

Thank you for your consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns.

Yours sincerely,

Rowan Williams

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, argued that staging “The Jungle” in New York will be “a profoundly significant event for the U.S. cultural world.”

Matthew Covey, a Brooklyn lawyer whose firm specializes in helping international artists overcome visa problems, assembled a 160-page package of legal arguments and letters of support for St. Ann's and the refugees. Mr. Covey said performing artists have faced challenges getting visas to enter this country for years, but that the travel ban is a new, and largely untested, hurdle. In addition to Syria and Iran, it restricts travel from Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Venezuela and North Korea, and was just upheld by the Supreme Court in June, after two previous versions were overturned.

“The issue of refugees is on everyone’s mind right now,” Mr. Covey said, “so a powerful artistic piece coming out of that context is very compelling, and when this first came in, we said, ‘We have to do this, and we have to make it work.’”

The case was given a push by Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, a New York Democrat whose office urged the State Department and the American Embassy in London to take a look. “Welcoming refugees is what the Statue of Liberty stands for and what our nation stands for, and this play is so important because it gives refugees a chance to bring



their powerful experiences to the United States,” she said in a statement.



Mr. Moradi, a 26-year-old martial artist, said he left Iran because his life as a Kurd had become increasingly difficult there. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

A State Department official, who declined to be quoted by name, said he could not discuss the specifics of the “Jungle” cases, citing “visa confidentiality.” He added, though, that the government is granting waivers for people whose entry “would be in the national interest” and “would not pose a threat to national security or public safety” and whose prohibited entry “would cause undue hardship.”

Those are the arguments the show’s promoters sought to make — saying support from the government (St. Ann’s gets money from the New York State Council on the Arts) and testimonials from important cultural figures showed that the project was in the national interest. “We said, ‘We have a story that we think people should hear, and only these people can tell it,’” said David Lan, the former artistic director of London’s Young Vic Theater, where “The Jungle” was presented before moving to the West End.

Sting and his wife, Trudie Styler, sent a letter to the American Embassy in London, arguing that “the play discusses and confronts issues and stories that are largely unreachable outside the world of art,” while the former archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, called the British production “a genuine national event” and said, “I believe that the planned production in New York will likewise be a profoundly significant event for the U.S. cultural world.”



Mr. Daldry, right, with the actor Mohammad Amiri. “The odds were against us,” Mr. Daldry said of mounting the play in the United States. “We knew it was going to be a challenge.” Karsten Moran for The New York Times

“The Jungle” is not the first production to win waivers from the travel ban, but they are rare. Rami Farah, a Syrian dancer, was issued one to perform at Cincinnati’s Contemporary Arts Center. The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra said it had received waivers for musicians from Syria and Iran to join a five-city American tour. And Nassim Soleimanpour, an Iranian playwright, just got one that should allow him to come to the United States to appear in his play, “Nassim,” which is scheduled to begin performances at New York City Center on Thursday.

The challenges are common enough that Mr. Moayed, a founder of the New York theater company Waterwell, said he has been called upon before to fill in for actors who might be prevented from entering the country; he also faced an issue last year when an Iranian actor was barred from traveling to New York for a Waterwell production of “Hamlet” set in Persia, in which Mr. Moayed was starring. “I knew exactly what I was walking into, because this was not the first time,” he said. “I’ve been dealing with immigration since I was a kid, so I know it’s complicated, even when it’s not complicated.”

But those involved with the push to bring “The Jungle” actors to New York said their success both illuminates the new obstacles for artists from restricted countries, as well as the possibility that those obstacles can be surmounted.

“Part of what makes the ending of this story really exciting is that it shows there are channels through this,” Mr. Covey said. “The U.S. immigration system is obviously very connected to the current administration, but there remain ways that the value of a piece like this can be recognized and can be supported, even though it does appear to run contrary to what we hear from the top of that administration.”

*Follow Michael Paulson on Twitter: @MichaelPaulson.*

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