

Benedict Cumberbatch condemns UK government's inhumane refugee policy

Robert Stevens
2 November 2015

Benedict Cumberbatch denounced the British government's treatment of refugees last week from the stage of London's Barbican Theatre.

The actor, who was appearing as the lead character in the National Theatre's production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, spoke after the final curtain call to make what one audience member described as an "impassioned" statement.

The audience member said, "He began by reading out a poem called *Home* by [Somali poet] Warsan Shire. He then spoke about a friend who had come back from the Greek island of Lesbos a few months ago, where there were 5,000 people arriving a day, and how the [British] government was allowing just 20,000 refugees into the country over the next five years."

Cumberbatch described how, "Everywhere on the horizon there was nothing but boats and on the shoreline nothing but lifejackets."

He then said, "Fuck the politicians", with the audience member recalling, "It's not quite what you'd expect when you go for an evening with the Bard, but it got a few cheers."

Cumberbatch has regularly appealed to Barbican audiences after performances for donations to the Save the Children charity projects to help Syrian refugees. In his October 12 plea, which can be viewed on YouTube, he urged the audience to act as "citizens of the world" and "let's just bypass any government" to help refugees.

The words Cumberbatch cites from Shire's poem are:

*no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well
you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat*

unless the water is safer than the land

In September, Cumberbatch introduced a video, including the words from *Home*, to a charity song in support of the refugees. The song "Help Is Coming" is a re-release of a single by Crowded House. The song was released following the global broadcasting of the images of the drowned three-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi.

The same week, Prime Minister David Cameron announced that his government would take in just 20,000 Syrian refugees over the course of the next five years. This plan was immediately opposed in a full-page advert in the *Guardian* by more than 100 cultural figures, including Cumberbatch, Sir Anish Kapoor, Anoushka Shankar, Keira Knightley, Jude Law, Sir Michael Caine and Colin Firth. They stated that the government's response was "too little, too late." Their appeal called on the government "to wake up to the urgency of the current crisis and work with its European counterparts to offer immediate humanitarian help and agree long-term solutions to refugee resettlement."

One of those who organised the *Guardian* advert response was Adam Broomberg, a South African artist based in London. Broomberg said he felt moved to act after Cameron, earlier this year, had described the refugees as a "swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain."

Broomberg told the *Guardian*, "It was the callous, inhumane language the government used that made me so angry. That galvanised me to do something. This is where I live, this is a government that's meant to represent me, and it isn't coming anywhere close. In fact, I find the language it's using toxic. I find Cameron's cynical use of targeted assassination

insulting.

“We’re trying to voice empathy on behalf of this country, and critique a government that’s not representing its people. Hopefully we’ll make a dent.”

Other cultural figures who have spoken out against the Cameron government are author JK Rowling and actor Samantha Morton. Rowling said the response to the refugee crisis was “utterly shameful”. Morton said, “My grandparents were Polish refugees. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for this country accepting my Polish grandparents.” She added, “The world can change so quickly and if we are not careful this situation will become worse than the Second World War, it will be so horrific. I think in history people will look back and they will judge.”

Last month, at the premiere of his film *Black Mass*, Cumberbatch told reporters, “I don’t think the government is doing enough [about the Syrian crisis], I’m glad to say that. I would like to sit down with [Conservative Home Secretary] Theresa May and really get an idea of how her economic and political model works.”

He added, “There is a huge crisis and not enough is being done. Yes, we need long-term solutions; yes, we need to get people out of the camps so they don’t make a perilous journey; yes, it’s a good idea to actually have a specific solution, I suppose, once they arrive here. But to say 20,000 over five years when 5,000 arrive in one day? We’ve all got to wake up to this.”

Cumberbatch is probably the highest-profile actor working in Britain today. Though his prescriptions are and largely based on appeals for a charitable response and reason from politicians, he is speaking to much wider and growing discontent in society.

To the extent he denounces the political elite and their set-up, he articulates the response of millions of people in Britain and internationally who are appalled at the response of the governments in Britain, the European Union and internationally to the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. This is just one manifestation of a groundswell of opposition to governments whose perpetual wars in the Middle East and North Africa have caused the refugee crisis.

Cumberbatch has received significant support for his pleas at the Barbican, with audiences giving more than £150,000 to Save the Children. His remarks were a breath of fresh air, clashing with the general air of

conformity that has dominated within artistic circles for an extended period. One person on Twitter stated, “It is so wonderful to see a person with fame and influence to use their stage to directly speak about the refugee crisis as Cumberbatch has.”

It should not be overlooked that Cumberbatch made his comments while playing *Hamlet*. The NT’s 12-week-run production, which finished October 31, met a massive and unprecedented public response. All performances of the play sold out within minutes of going on sale, almost a year in advance, becoming the fastest-selling ticket for a show in London theatre history.

The National Theatre Live’s broadcast was the highest grossing UK event cinema opening of 2015. Within three days, it had taken nearly £1.9 million at the box office. The interest generated went well beyond the British Isles, with 225,000 people in more than 25 countries buying cinema tickets to watch the October 15 show beamed live from London.

A thoughtful comment by the writer and critic Andrew Dickson, “War, migration and revenge: Shakespeare is the bard of today’s world,” published in the *Guardian*, draws attention to the great contemporary significance of Shakespeare’s “rebellious spirit.”

He wrote, “It is impossible to look at Sarah Lee’s photographs of actors from the Globe theatre in London playing *Hamlet* at the UNHCR Zaatari camp near the Jordanian border and not feel moved... in March last year, more than 100 Syrian children mounted their own Arabic-language production of *King Lear*, directed by the actor Nawar Bulbul. Like *Hamlet*, *Lear* is a tragedy whose themes—insanity, war, sundered families, loss of land—reflect the experience of many refugees.”

He concluded, “There’s something rotten in more than one state. And as Shakespeare well knew, it isn’t just Denmark that’s a prison.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact