

The Walk: Little Amal puppet's 8,000 km march across Europe to highlight refugee crisis

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On November 3, giant puppet Little Amal reached her final destination in Manchester, England having trekked 8,000 km across Europe from the Turkish/ Syrian border.

Representing a nine-year-old refugee girl, the puppet was escorted on the final leg of her journey by an enthusiastic crowd to a reception organised by the Manchester International Festival.

The capacity audience of 5,000 in the city's Castlefield Bowl chanted, "Refugees are welcome." They later witnessed the reunion of Amal with her "mother," a disembodied voice calling through mist in a moving finale. Video of footage of Little Amal in Manchester can be viewed [here](#).

The Walk began in July, passing through 65 cities, towns and villages, the route taken by the hundreds of thousands of displaced people fleeing imperialist war-ravaged homelands in the Middle East and Africa. Described as a "travelling festival of art and hope in support of refugees," *The Walk* was created by the collaboration of theatre company *Good Chance* and the *Handspring Puppet Company* (creator of *War Horse*).

The *Good Chance* company previously staged *The Jungle*, based on the Calais refugee camps that blighted the French border and the reputation of the EU after US imperialism instigated the 2015 Syrian civil war. Little Amal first appeared as a character in the play, one of the many unaccompanied children living in refugee camps.

The *Handspring Puppet Company*, established 40 years ago in Cape Town, is one of the foremost puppet theatre companies in the world.

Controlled by three operators, Little Amal, whose name in Arabic means hope, towers above the crowd at 11 feet five inches tall (3.5m), with a cane body and carbon fibre head. Complete with traditional clothing and flowing hair, the puppet is uncannily life-like—a credit to the artists involved.

Artistic director Amir Nizar Zuabi explained his inspiration for *The Walk*: "In 2015, at the height of the refugee crisis when hundreds of thousands of people were walking across Europe with all the pain and anguish that we saw, I started thinking, 'maybe we need to create a new model of theatre, maybe we need to take our theatre into the streets where people were

walking.'"

He decided to create a puppet of gigantic stature to encourage people to "think big and act bigger." The purpose of the project was to "highlight the potential of the refugee, not just their dire circumstances."

The work of the *Good Chance* theatre company is informed by a belief that "Throughout history the movement of people has fuelled human progress, enriched culture and accelerated the acquisition of knowledge. *The Walk* is a celebration of migration and cultural diversity that will tell the story of the contributions made by refugees and immigrants."

The project was funded by charities Comic Relief and Backstage Trust, the Arts Council England and public donations.

Almost everywhere she travelled, crowds turned out to welcome Little Amal and express sympathy for the plight of refugees made homeless by 40 years of imperialist war. Greeted by cheers and applause, sometimes tears, the response showed the working class do not share governments' hostile attitude towards immigrants.

From Syria, Amal passed through Turkey, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, Belgium and France. After visiting London, she travelled north through cities including Birmingham and Sheffield to Greater Manchester. On every stop, communities and local artists organized cultural events.

On November 2, the penultimate day of her journey, Little Amal arrived in the town of Rochdale, just outside Manchester. The warmth of the crowds in the packed streets was palpable. After Amal traversed the town centre, a group of local school children sang a lullaby. Footage of Little Amal in Rochdale can be viewed [here](#).

Not every town was welcoming, however. Encouraged by the xenophobic policies of governments, a tiny minority of reactionaries threw stones at the puppet. A village of monasteries in Greece refused her passage.

If Amal was a real girl, she would not have made her way to Manchester so easily. Her way would have been blocked by barbed wire and national borders. Most likely, she would not have passed through Turkey, but would have been thrown into

a concentration camp funded by the European Union (EU) as part of its Fortress Europe barring the way to asylum seekers. An EU deal signed in 2016 allows Greece to deport refugees that manage to reach its territory to Turkey.

Hundreds of thousands reside in camps in the Greek Aegean islands. Recently, 375 refugees from Afghanistan were stranded in the Mediterranean for four days, trapped on a ship with engine trouble, as the Greek and Turkish authorities haggled over who should rescue them. When the ship was finally towed to safety, the passengers were dehydrated, hungry and in distress.

Boats carrying refugees have been filmed being pushed back into dangerous waters by Greek coastguards, while at the Greek/Turkish land border refugees face border police violence.

Had Amal managed the journey across Europe, at the mercy of people smugglers, on reaching the port of Calais in northern France she would have joined 2,000 migrants, including 300 unaccompanied children stranded at the site of “The Jungle”—1.5 square miles (3.9 sq km) of refugee camps demolished in 2016. Police in Calais carry out daily evictions there, seizing tents, sleeping bags and blankets. They placed boulders to impede access to aid agency vehicles providing water, food and clothing.

Refugees are no more welcome in the UK than they are in the EU, though these governments, in supporting US wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, are responsible for creating the refugee crisis. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, this year, up to November 7, almost 100,000 (95,494) refugees have entered Europe from the Mediterranean; 1,313 are missing and presumed dead this year.

The English Channel is another refugee graveyard. Migrants are forced to attempt the dangerous crossing in small boats or dinghies because legal routes are barred. More than 21,000 desperate migrants managed the crossing so far this year, double the figure for 2020. On the very day that Little Amal arrived in Manchester, a record 853 made it. Since 1999, according Institute of Race Relations research, almost 300 people had died in the 20 years to 2020 attempting the perilous Channel crossing. Over the weekend of November 6 another refugee drowned, while French authorities reported two drownings earlier.

In June, the body of 15-month-old Kurdish-Iranian Artin Iran-Nejad found off Norway’s coast was identified. He drowned along with his parents and two older siblings when the boat in which they were travelling capsized while attempting the Channel crossing.

In 2019, UK Conservative government Home Secretary Priti Patel promised migrant crossings would become “an infrequent phenomenon,” offering France £54 million to step up security their side of the channel.

Campaign group Freedom from Torture tweeted “this [UK] government is trying to push through an anti-refugee bill that

will prevent many children just like Amal from ever being reunited with their families.”

The government’s Nationality and Border Bill being pushed through parliament repudiates the UN 1951 Refugee Convention, turning asylum seekers and migrants into criminals, while strengthening border agencies. Between 2015 and 2019 only 5,000 entered the UK via official channels, though the number of refugees globally rose to 20.45 million. The bill targets not just “people smugglers” but those providing humanitarian assistance. “Illegal” immigrants face jail sentences up to four years. Volunteer group Channel Rescue reported UK Border Force vessels engaged in dangerous pushback manoeuvres, endangering the lives of migrants.

On reaching Manchester, Little Amal would not find sanctuary. For the first time since the Windrush scandal hit, the Home Office is about to deport a planeload of people to Jamaica—among them a 20-year-old woman who came to the UK when she was 13.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government, backed by the opposition Labour Party and the unions, subordinates the health and well-being of children to profit. Children are forced to attend unsafe schools, with zero mitigation measures, while the number of COVID cases soar and child COVID deaths have reached 108. The long-term health of children is also threatened, with 11,000 child cases of Long COVID for over a year. At the same time, child poverty has reached 4.3 million.

Credit must be given to those whose efforts produced *The Walk*, raising the plight of refugees and galvanising an international response. This artistic endeavour was a refreshing departure from much navel gazing that passes as modern art.

While *The Walk* highlighted the problems and suffering of migrants and refugees, it requires a mass mobilisation of the working class on a socialist programme to end the refugee crisis, war, poverty and the pandemic.



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