



# Talent in performance



Bahram in scary makeup

It was a delight to see two Iranians, both people RSG are proud to be associated with, who have travelled so far from their culture re-creating it for us on the stage at the Barnfield Theatre. I am sure they must have rehearsed for many hours to synchronise so seamlessly with the narrative and choreography of the pieces. They looked entirely relaxed and natural and particularly impressive was the acting. Bahram looked for all the world the lover experiencing the full range of feelings. We might well have talent here to



Our two stars with the Lilac Harem dance troupe after a successful show

develop! The belly dancing of course was colourful; sometimes robust and sometimes subtle. Perhaps the refugees could set up

some dancing classes for volunteers, some of whom might possibly appreciate becoming a bit more sinuous. [FJ]

## EU enlargement so far a success

The EU employment commissioner, Vladimir Spidla, has declared that the EU enlargement which took place in May 2004, when eight eastern European states joined the EU, has not generated 'any catastrophic tendencies'. The most catastrophic tendency most people expected was a flood of cheap labour from the east which would over-burden public services, drive down

wages and undermine workplace protections. The UK (along with Sweden and Eire) chose not to impose restrictions on the number coming, and the UK has actually seen 290,000 arrive. This is enthusiastically received by the government and also (now) by the Tories. They say that immigration is essential to our economic wellbeing. They may be right, but in the mean time there is every likelihood that wages have been kept lower than they would otherwise have been (wage infla-

tion has been mysteriously low) and many firms are enthusiastic about taking on Poles or others from the east. Supporters of free movement of labour can point to many advantages – higher tax revenues, richer cultural mix, filling skills gaps and so on. It is also the best method of providing aid to poorer countries through money sent back to families at home. It needs careful management, however, and politicians need to explain what is happening to resentful electorates.

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## REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUP DEVON

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### RSG management committee

Next meeting is Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> March in Wat Tyler House (see above), 6.45 p.m. Everyone welcome. For information contact the office.

Every meeting starts by considering any proposals or requests put forward by asylum seekers, who are particularly welcome. Agenda items to the office if possible two weeks before the meeting, please.

*NB views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Refugee Support Group Devon*

# Refugee Week 2006 and RSG Emergency Fund

*This year's Refugee Week is planned for the 19<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> June. Annette Hughes writes about preparations so far. Meanwhile work with asylum seekers who do not qualify for government support continues, with help from RSG members ...*

## Refugee Week

In collaboration with Amnesty International, Devon Race Equality Council, Exeter Community Initiatives, Devon and Cornwall Police, the Global Centre, White Rabbit Theatre Company and Devon Schools, RSG have commenced planning for refugee week this year. Proposed activities include a football tournament (let's hope the sun shines again ...), displays and exhibitions in various locations, schools poster competition, film and possibly music event, inclusion in Exeter Playday with craft activities, theatre workshop, coffee morning, multi-faith service and some topical speakers. Work has now started on securing venues and attracting funding to support these events. We shall keep you all posted on events as they are confirmed - and of course be asking for your support in making this a most memorable event in Devon. If you would like to get involved please register your support by contacting Annette or Susan at the office.

## Emergency Fund appeal

Many thanks to those of you who responded to last month's emergency fund appeal. Our emergency fund is vital in providing support to those seeking asylum who find themselves ineligible for

government funding. We are currently helping individuals who are destitute with no fixed accommodation. A small weekly income from RSG may be the only funds they receive. It has been particularly distressing to hear how people have been living through these harsh winter months, and while we are able to help in a small way it is often hard for people to actually ask for this help. Other help we have been able to provide is funds for transport - particularly for getting to court cases and appeals in London. Sometimes cases are not listed with the courts until the day before and therefore individuals cannot take advantage of the cheaper advance booking fares on the trains or coaches (has anyone bought a train ticket recently?). So thanks again for your continued support.

Although we now have a small regular income however, more would still enable us to do more. **If you would like to help, donation forms can be downloaded from our website, [www.rsgdevon.org.uk](http://www.rsgdevon.org.uk).** [AH]

## What it's like being a trustee

A couple of months ago RSG appointed a number of new trustees. I was one and since then I've been finding out how many things go on around RSG.

RSG is a relatively small charity, but it deals with a very complex subject. I'd been working for it as a volunteer for several years (since I retired from full-time work) and I knew about some aspects of its work, but on being appointed as a trustee I thought I ought to get acquainted with the rest. The Charity Commission is very stern about trustees: they are individually and collectively responsible for the charity's being operated according to the law, treating its staff, volunteers and clients properly and not getting into debt. In extreme cases a trustee can be personally liable if he or she lets something bad happen. So when you are sitting in a meeting and the chairperson says 'Is that OK, everyone?' and you've just nodded off, that might be the one point at which you could have prevented a disaster. Or if you don't read the bits about money (which often seem to be printed in smaller print than the other stuff, and involve *numbers*) you might be liable for the organisation taking on a debt it can't pay. It's all a bit sobering.

So, I tried to find out as much as I could. And I'm still trying ... One thing is obvious, though, RSG is having to change all the time, because the position of refugees - and where they come from - changes all the time. The laws change. And trustees will have to change too. [JC]

## Committee report

The RSG management committee met on 15 February. The main issues discussed were:

- **use of the emergency fund**

A number of individuals are still receiving weekly hand-outs from the emergency fund and some receive additional

ad-hoc help with travelling expenses to/from hearings, clothes etc. While the emergency fund is looking reasonably healthy, standing orders do not quite cover the current level of support. Last month's appeal eased the situation but we still needed to be very cautious in how the money was spent, even though some individuals were in serious need.

- **English classes**

English classes are on hold because of poor attendance. The team of English helpers has held a survey among (potential) students and met several times to discuss whether/how to organise new classes. There are plans to organise a half day workshop on British society/citizenship, in view of the new policies requiring applicants for citizenship to pass tests.

- **fundraising**

The committee welcomed Zen Bailey, who was considering becoming the new finance officer. The new fundraising subcommittee met and identified two major potential funders. Applications will be submitted as soon as possible. It was noted that unless we manage to pull in some substantial funding RSG's survival will be at stake.

**Next meeting: 15<sup>th</sup> March**

## Bahram Raad

Another profile written by Halley Cohen

Bahram fled persecution in Iran almost 2½ years ago. Dispersed to Exeter, he arrived without possessions, spoke no English and had left everyone and everything he knew behind.

As Bahram speaks, it is clear that he is a man of thoughtful and quiet determination, a real survivor. He says, 'It was quite difficult when I came here. I didn't know about anything – what is England? I decided learning English was the first thing to do so I went to college and RSG language courses. I studied five to six hours per day.'

Though Bahram got indefinite leave to remain (ILR) after eight months, he mourns the fact that so many of his friends have not been so fortunate and that there is so little he can do to help. His advice to asylum seekers is to learn English and make friends.

Bahram's biggest challenge after receiving ILR was finding a job. 'I went to the Job Centre and they sent me to Action for Employers. It was hard to get work. My skills are as a painter decorator but my problem was my English. Employers kept letting me go after a few weeks. Three months ago, I found a job with First Response, a care agency that looks after elderly and disabled people. It is interesting for me and they have been very helpful.'

Bahram speaks passionately about wanting to help others, to give something back. 'I love my job because I can help somebody else. It makes me happy. Others have helped me. I say "thank you God" for showing me something I didn't know and for being able to work with disabled people. They smile and have a great sense of humour.'

Bahram has embraced life fully in Exeter. Along with the time he gives as a volunteer to RSG, he has joined a theatre troupe called Lilac Harem who specialise in belly dancing [see page 1 above]. Having done some Arabic dancing before, he applied the same determination to this that he seems to apply to everything else. 'We practised two times a week and then every day for two weeks before the show at the Barnfield last month.' He adds proudly that this was the group's first sold-out performance.

As I say good-bye to Bahram, I am humbled when he says, 'I am so happy at the moment. I thought I had died. Now I am alive. Thank you very much to RSG who help give us a life here.' My response was to thank him for everything he has given back already. [HC]

## Don't mention the T word ...

*New Labour is consistently ducking the question of torture, following defeat of the Home Office's spirited attempts to persuade the House of Lords that torture evidence ought to be permissible. What are our elected representatives up to?*

Since the Newsletter last dealt with the torture question the UK government has continued to equivocate and deny. This makes it almost certain that, at the very least, we are determined to continue to reap whatever harvest can be obtained by other people torturing (and according to a recent UN report this certainly includes the USA). At worst we may be doing it ourselves: this is quintessentially an area where one can never trust British governments to tell their voters the truth.

For months I've been writing to the PM to get his views on this (see last September's issue). Normally the PM's office replies to letters within about a month. For several months now there has been total silence. When we asked him whether his references to 'abuse' in speeches were likely to stir up popular anger against immigrants (see issues of August and September 2004) he waffled and then refused to comment.

(Note that this criticism has surfaced elsewhere, notably in the recent report of the Independent Race Monitor.) Torture, it seems, is even more difficult to deal with – better to pretend that the Royal Mail has lost the letter. Less exalted New Labour figures are likely to reply with some such equivocation as 'the government condemns the use of torture'.

The real issue with torture is that it is not enough passively to condemn, or even issue statements criticising other countries' human rights abuses (as long as they are not our allies or major trading partners, that is). Torture is a constant feature of world politics and requires a really hard and consistent push by governments, not even to eradicate it, because that is probably as impossible as abolishing prostitution or fraud, but to prevent it becoming a routine part of intelligence operations. It clearly is, for the USA. Our government's pathetic wriggles on renditions and on the use of evidence obtained through torture suggest very strongly that we are not prepared to give it up either.

The problem from the point of view of politicians is that the cost of completely ruling out torture is very high. If there were a second 7/7 (as seems all too likely) many elements in the media, and many voters, would blame the government. Torture evi-

dence *may* sometimes yield information which *might* make a terrorist outrage less likely. (The use of torture on large numbers of people, most of them innocent, is of course virtually certain to increase the number of such atrocities in the medium and long term, but politicians operate in the short term.) The answer for those of us who disapprove of torture, whether for practical or for moral reasons, is to maintain constant counter-pressure.

Keep writing. And send your letters by registered post.

**Postscript: I took my own advice. As a result of sending yet another copy to the PM's office, this time registered, I got a letter saying my query had been 'forwarded to the Foreign Office'. Readers of the September 2005 issue will remember that this reply was last received in December 2004. Round and round and round ...**

### 'Glorification'

Meanwhile the House of Commons, clearly panicked by the 5<sup>th</sup> February London demonstration by Muslims opposed to the Danish cartoons, has put 'glorification of terror' back into the Terrorism Bill, whence it had been sensibly removed by the House of Lords. Failing another amendment there (it goes back on 28<sup>th</sup> February) this will soon be part of UK law.

Astonishingly there is no definition of the word 'glorification'. When challenged on this the Home Secretary repeatedly said there was no need, since the public understood it. He also claimed that court judgements clarified it, but when challenged (again) was unable to refer to a single such judgement. The courts would decide, he said. But in English law (at least up to the present) the courts decide on the basis of the law, not the other way round. It is terrifyingly clear that 'glorify' will in fact mean more or less anything a jury might think it means. The offence (and the accompanying offence of dissemination) have a truly mind-boggling capacity for injustice, and any of us may in due course be caught up in it. However in the mean time it enables the government to embarrass the opposition ... [JC]

# A licence to abuse

*The government is dragging its heels on proposals to tighten up the regulation of gangmasters.*

In February 2004, 23 Chinese men drowned on Morecambe beach. They had been picking cockles. They were working at night (and on Yuan Xiao night at that – a traditional Chinese festival) because of persistent threats and hostility from locals.

The hostility was understandable. Chinese cockle pickers got about 40p per kilo. Cockles are quite difficult to get in Devon (Morecambe Bay cockles are mostly exported) but fresh cockles sell here at about £10 a kilo. Allowing for the shells this is a markup of about 800%. By comparison, milk in Devon is sold at a 65% markup. Profits from cockles are therefore potentially huge. Employers said that Chinese workers were half the price of locals, worked harder and produced more. They also needed no expenditure on safety precautions: no safety equipment was provided. The Chinese did not even have tide tables; most were not told how to dial 999. They were the responsibility of a Chinese gangmaster, Lin Liang Ren, from Liverpool. But the cockles were bought by local businessmen and sold on to UK food firms.

The scale of the tragedy caused major, but very short-lived, outrage in the national press. As a result Parliament passed the Gangmaster (Licensing) Act. (In case you think the government was very prompt, it originated in a private member's bill put forward by Jim Sheridan, a Scottish back-bencher.) The Act came into effect in July last year. It made it illegal (in a group of specified occupations) to provide workers for a second person unless you were licensed, and created a licensing authority to enforce this. The licensing authority came into being in April last year.

The 2004 Act was backed not only by the Transport and General Workers' Union but by a coalition of organisations in the industries involved (the Temporary Labour Working Group [TLWG], including all the big supermarkets, the National Farmers' Union, the Association of Labour Providers and many others). Their attitude was, and remains, very clear: the problem with extreme exploitation of la-

bour is that the worst drives out the best: if somebody is paying rock bottom wages you will be driven out of business unless you do the same. The answer is for the legal system to impose minimum standards which no-one is allowed to undercut. (History nerds will remember that the same phenomenon occurred with the struggle for factory acts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.)

With such broad and influential backing, the government might be expected to move quickly. However this is not the case. Although the basic structure envisaged in the act has been created the Government is now trying to exclude whole industrial processes from its scope. The act, you will not be surprised to learn, permits the Secretary of State to make regulations excluding specified categories from the act if she wants to. Apparently she does want to. New government proposals are likely to exclude at least 150,000 workers from the protection of the law, according to the TLWG (which is protesting vigorously). The government feels that 'primary' work (picking, and so on) needs to be protected but 'secondary' (packing) does not. In fact, as the industry points out, the same workers are bused to and fro between the sections according to the ebb and flow of work, and the same abuses prevail in both sectors.

Why does the government want to leave so many workers unprotected?

Apparently, it's all down to New Labour ideology, which includes a commitment to reduce the 'burden' of regulation on industry. Leading figures in Whitehall are struggling to restrict the operation of the 2004 Act and seem likely to succeed.

Meanwhile the industry conducted an enquiry among 164 gangmasters into their employment practices. (As the enquiry did not have compulsory powers, and the register had not been set up yet, the 164 were volunteers.) To quote the *Guardian's* Felicity Lawrence, the enquiry turned up '13 instances of bonded or forced labour, 28 examples of illegal employment of children and young workers; 40 cases of illegal deductions from pay; 343 breaches of the law on the status of foreign workers; and any num-

ber of the usual abuses over excessive hours'. And this from an enquiry responded to voluntarily!

It is of course obvious that most of the malpractices are in any case illegal. As with anti-terror legislation, the real problem is that existing laws are not being enforced. What the 2004 Act provides is the requirement for gangmasters to register. It does not make anything else illegal which was not so before. The government's intention to restrict its operation will mean, therefore, that some gangmasters will not be registered, which simply means it will be easier for them to escape prosecution. Is this the government's real intention?

All governments are of course aware that in a time of high employment and an ageing population immigration is one of the main answers to labour shortages. Unemployment has started to rise again in the UK but many firms still find it difficult to recruit enough workers, including (though not exclusively) those with low skills.

Another major economic problem is the need to keep wages low to reduce the threat of competition from places like China which can use rural workers with very low wages and work safety standards. Again the answer is immigration; and of course scrupulous protection of immigrant labour negates the whole point. Any UK government is therefore likely to have to be dragged kicking and screaming into effective enforcement of labour regulation laws (most of which are already in place for our own workers). Those who worry about immigrants (illegal or otherwise) need to keep up the pressure.

Last week a tragedy in East Anglia underlined the risky nature of industrial practices yet again when a minibus carrying agricultural workers collided with a lorry and seven people were killed.

**Here we go again ...**

Meanwhile, immigrant cockle pickers are still working on Morecambe beach, very much as they were before. They're Polish these days. The gangmasters are still employed by local businessmen and still sell to UK food firms. The Poles complain that their employers have no concern for safety. And so it goes on ... [JC]