

A "beautiful life" by
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A Beautiful Life written by Michael Futcher and Helen Howard in 1998 is a brave piece of contemporary Australian Theatre, exploring the controversial and much debated issue of immigration in Australia, while providing a highly symbolic, poignant and emotional experience for the audience. This play is based on the memories of an Iranian refugee (Hamid), his wife (Jhila) and their son (Amir) who settled in Australia in the 1980s, focusing on how their cultural background ultimately leads to their persecution by the Australian Government.

As this play is told from their perspective, the audience is encouraged to empathise with the plight of refugees in Australia. Through the use of many interesting theatrical techniques, such as symbolism, breaking the fourth wall, flashbacks, etc, the play sheds light on the issues of the Australian Government and legal system, prejudices towards refugees in Australia and the migrant experience in Australia. One of the major thematic concerns in A Beautiful Life is the issue of the Australian Government and legal system in relation to the matter of refugees in Australia.

Hamid and Jhila are being persecuted by the Australian Government and legal system due to their actions in a protest at the Iranian embassy in Australia. Through the use of flashbacks the audience is shown the horrible torture Hamid endured under the Iranian regime in Tehran, the stage directions in Act One, Scene 15 state " AHMAD stuffs the jacket into HAMID's mouth, ties it behind his head, and pulls at the jacket to lift up his head further, while the INTERROGATOR produces a baton".

As a result of this, the audience becomes sympathetic towards Hamid and therefore does not understand why the Australian Government is "trying to make an example of you [Hamid and Jhila]" (Act One, Scene 17). Through acting this play out in class I became very disillusioned with the Australian Government, as the characterisation of Hamid and Jhila being two honest, good people is so strong. "What? So I cannot say to Judge - I am guilty of spraying paint, I am guilty of breaking office - I am sorry, please punish me, and I am absolved. (Act One, Scene 17). Hamid's fight for honesty and the truth appeals to Australian audiences as we pride ourselves on being honest and hard workers. Acting this out in class I also came to realise that the court case was less about Hamid and Jhila and more about the Australian Government trying to maintain credibility. Stylised movement and symbolism is utilised by the playwrights in order to convey to the audience the vulture-like nature of the media when it comes to reporting on matters to do with the legal system in relation to migrants in Australia. Two JOURNALISTS move around HAMID like sharks. JOURNALIST ONE shines a hand-held light in HAMID's face." (Act One, Scene 4). It is the stylised movement in this stage direction which engages the audience; the use of symbolism conveys the deeper meaning. The term 'sharks' and the use of the hand-held light are all reminiscent of interrogation scenes, exposing again the injustice of the Australian Government and legal system. Acting this out in class was quite difficult to do but when done correctly is a very effective theatrical technique.

The fast paced circling by the journalists created tension and suspense, making the audience sympathise with the struggling Hamid in the middle of

them. Through the use of a split scene in Act Two, Scene 12, the playwrights are able to draw parallels between the Iranian Government and the Australian Government. In an Australian context, there are connotations of 'bad' and 'evil' with the Iranian Government, and by drawing out similarities between the two systems, the playwrights effectively communicate to the audience the flaws of the Australian Government and legal system.

In my own experience, this scene is extremely difficult but also extremely effective, the split scene with Hamid being the commonality between the two really engages an audience, encouraging them to identify with Hamid's struggle. By exposing the flaws of our legal system, the audience is able to empathise with the plight of not only Hamid and Jhila, but all refugees in Australia. It is through the use of these theatrical techniques that A Beautiful Life can connect with audiences and provide them with the idea that the Australian Government is prejudice towards refugees and therefore empathise with the adversity Hamid and Jhila experience.

Another cultural issue that is the focus of A Beautiful Life is prejudices towards refugees and racism in Australia. The character of Brendan (one of Hamid's lawyers) embodies the Australian attitude towards refugees, often making rude, racist and ignorant remarks, " BRENDA: It's a pity we don't speak Arab/JHILA: Is Farsi/BRENDAN: Same difference" (Act One, Scene 5). Through workshops in class I came to realise that the character of Brendan was extremely important in conveying the prevalence of racism in Australia and also the ignorance many Australians have towards the struggle of refugees in Australia. Brendan is an extremely important character, as he is the one who develops most. By the end of the play the audience can see that

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his attitude towards Hamid and Jhila has changed completely and uses all his power to try and stop the unfair persecution by the Australian Government. "It's not a life he takes for granted." (Act Two, Scene 12). Through the use of dialogue the audience can see that Brendan cares for Hamid and Jhila.

The use of this character arc by the playwrights is extremely important, as Brendan's attitude represents the majority of Australian views of refugees, so his change of heart gives hope to the audience that racism and prejudices can be abolished within Australia. The use of breaking the fourth wall is prevalent in this play, the character of Amir often communicating directly to the audience his own thoughts and feelings on the action.

In one of these incidents, he tells the audience of the racism and prejudices he is experiencing as a result of being Iranian. "They called me Saddam Hussein on the school bus." (Act Two Scene 1). As Amir communicates his thoughts and feeling directly to the audience, they are able to connect and therefore empathise with him. When acting this out in class, I found that the technique of breaking the fourth wall was extremely important and effective, not only in terms of plot development but also in terms of connecting with and engaging audiences.

The playwrights want the audience to identify with the struggles of these immigrants and by directly conveying Amir's thoughts and feelings to the audience, they become emotionally attached to him and therefore empathise with his plight. A convention that is used frequently throughout the play is the switching from Farsi to English. "HAMID: [in Farsi] I meant anger/JHILA: [in Farsi] They have twenty meanings for every word." (Act

One, Scene 3). The use of switching between the two different languages highlights the contrast in cultures between the Hamid and Jhila and the Australians.

It is also used as a symbol of ignorance of the Australian population. The language barriers also help aid in communicating the message of racism and prejudices in Australia. In my own experience, the switching rapidly between English and Farsi was quite difficult to do; however, it created a vocally unusual sound-scape which serves to engage the audience. The emotion is apparent in the dialogue, even though the precise meaning may not be, in this way the audience transcends cultural and linguistic barriers to connect to these characters and empathise with their struggle. Through the use of these theatrical techniques A Beautiful Life forces readers to consider their own attitude towards refugees and to feel sympathy for the hardship that is experienced by these characters. This play illustrates beautifully, yet tragically, the migrant experience in Australia. Australia has been seen as the land of opportunities for many years, yet the prejudice and ignorance with which refugees and migrants are met is astounding.

This play hopes to explore the issue of the migrant experience in Australia, and by effectively engaging audiences, hopes to rectify the often harmful experience encountered by migrants. Hamid and Jhila, like all migrants, came to Australia in search for the 'beautiful life' of freedom we experience here. They start their own business, send their son Amir to school and attempt to leave behind the horrible memories of Tehran. One of the major theatrical techniques used in this play is the continual presence of the cage on stage.

The cage is used to symbolise many things: a coffin, a Ute and a filing cabinet. The cage is most strongly associated with the coffin which is used in the torture scenes in Tehran, " AHMAD and another GUARD place HAMID in the coffin-like cage. " (Act One, Scene 17), these stage directions occur during a scene in Brendan's office in the present day, symbolising to the audience that the injustice Hamid experienced in Tehran still plagues him in Australia. The cage has connotations of oppression, injustice and persecution.

The use of the cage shocks the audience and conveys the brutality in Tehran, the harsh violence both disturbs and engages the audience, causing them to feel empathy for Hamid and both his experience in Tehran and his experience in Australia. Acting this scene out in class I became very empathetic towards Hamid; actually seeing a fellow student pretending to be squashed inside a cage generated an emotional response within me, making me identify and empathise with the struggles Hamid faced in Tehran and continues to face in Australia.

Hamid is very aware of the world in which he lives, contrasting with the assumption that many Australians make that all refugees are ignorant, simply wanting to encroach on Australian resources. In dialogue from Hamid the audience sees that he is aware of the stereotypes Australians place on him, " HAMID: Terrorist - no - they are all thinking we are a bunch of bad people, you know? That we bring our problems to this country. " This dialogue communicates to the audience that Hamid simply wants to leave his experiences of Tehran in the past and concentrate on his new life in Australia.

The characterisation of Hamid as knowledgeable and receptive contrasts with many Australians perception of migrants and this contrariety engages the audience and forces them consider whether their own judgments of migrants and refugees has been correct. Amir continuously breaks the fourth wall in this piece of theatre, connecting directly with the audience, conveying his family's experience of life in Australia, " Hardly anyone comes into the shop now. We've lost them. " (Act Two, Scene 1). The use of breaking the fourth wall is an extremely effective dramatic technique in order to engage and connect with the audience.

The characters' thoughts and feelings are being directly transposed to the audience, making it almost impossible to not experience an emotional reaction. Workshopping this scene in class I saw how effective the use of eye contact was when engaging an audience and when the fourth wall is broken eye contact can be utilised in order to generate an emotional connection with the audience. Through the use of these many and varied theatrical techniques A Beautiful Life engages with the audience, making them empathise with the struggles of the characters in order to communicate to them the true migrant experience in Australia.

The playwrights hope to educate the audience of not only the experiences and feelings of the migrants, but their own, perhaps misplaced judgements. A Beautiful Life is an extremely engaging piece of contemporary Australian theatre, exploring complex themes and ultimately providing the audience with an insight into the plight of refugees while still offering them a poignant tale of the struggles undergone in order for the characters to achieve " a beautiful life".

Through the use of many sophisticated theatrical techniques, *A Beautiful Life* communicates excellently and effectively to the audience the thematic concerns of the Australian Government and legal system, and prejudices towards refugees in Australia. It is also through the use of these many and varied techniques, such as symbolism, breaking the fourth wall, and split scenes, as well as the collaboration of different acting styles, such as surrealism and naturalism that the playwrights are able to engage the audience and encourage them to empathise with the struggles of the characters in the play.

A Beautiful Life bravely tackles the controversial issue of refugees in Australia and the accompanying social and political repercussions, shedding light on the inequality within Australia, without placing blame and therefore encouraging audiences to mend this inequality. *A Beautiful Life* proves itself to not only be a political statement, but a tale of courage and loss, struggle and triumph, and ultimately the universal search all humans partake in to find a beautiful life.