Better Paperwork: Welcome to Wonder(Eng)land

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A Score, Not a Script

A white rabbit that promises red buses and perfect queues; a row of doors that interrogate before they admit; a court that hands down the sentence before the verdict. *Ali in Wonder(Eng)land* unmakes Lewis Carroll's Wonderland and reconstructs it as vision of the British immigration system, with an uncanny relationship between sense and nonsense. Rules are everywhere, but exist only to exclude; the only progress that has been made is in the production of more officious paperwork.

Yet the text printed here will not behave. *Ali in Wonder(Eng)land* is not a stable, single-authored work with a clear dramatic structure, such that a director might lift off the page and stage. It's collectively authored, physically driven, politically live, and structurally dependent on the specific bodies and experiences of the performers who make and perform it. It's inseparable from the process and the people who produced it.

To print it is to embrace a paradox. Every play script is in some sense a trace of something that can exist fully only in performance, a set of instructions waiting to be brought to life rather than a complete artefact. This script – or better, score – has a more radical relation to performance. It's less a blueprint that a future production could follow than a record of the way one particular company worked, in a particular place, at a particular time; as much an account of how the piece was built within specific contexts as a set of lines ready to be spoken. The reader holds the residues of the process: of improvisations, experiments, trial and error, debates, and the irreducible particularity of bodies in rehearsal and in performance.[1] This introduction is offered as a companion to this score; it provides an account of the company that made it, of the politics it stages, of the literary strategies it adopts, and of the working methods that are inseparable from its meaning.

The Company: LegalAliens Theatre

LegalAliens Theatre is a migrant-led ensemble based in Haringey, North London, founded in 2012 by Artistic Director Lara Parmiani. The company is a Theatre of Sanctuary, an award given by the charity City of Sanctuary UK to arts organisations that commit to welcoming people seeking refuge and embedding that welcome in their practice.

The name carries a joke with a sting. Working on an early project, Lara was shocked to discover the term 'alien' within bureaucratic English, used not for creatures from outer space but for human beings, for anyone not a citizen of the United Kingdom.[2] The discovery shocked her, and the company's name grew out of it; the phrase is a wink at the audience, a way of 'making sure that everyone knows how ridiculous it is that human beings are called alien', and of acknowledging and calling out all alienating forms of classification.[3]

The company's working principles tell us how to read *Ali*, emphasising the importance of method: 'We don't do tokenism. Refugees and migrants are not the subjects of our work. They

[1] On the publication of devised and ensemble work as the documentation of a process rather than a reproducible blueprint, see, for example, Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1999).
[2] The legal substance behind the joke relates to the British Nationality Act 1981, which defines an alien as a person who is neither a British citizen, nor a citizen of Ireland, nor a Commonwealth citizen.
[3] Lara Parmiani, interviewed by Peter Maber, 'Legal Aliens: Lara Parmiani on Theatre, Migration and the Limits of Representation', in *(Mis)representation* (Northeastern University London, 2026).

are its makers'.[4] The play emerged, for the first time in 2023 and now again in 2026, from the company's Tottenham Project, a programme of free, professional-level theatre training and creative work for migrants, refugees and underrepresented communities. The performers who stage *Ali* each bring their own experience of the system the play satirises, and that experience is built into the text.[5]

LegalAliens' own practice is deliberately eclectic and reflects its artists' journeys. Lara trained both academically and at a traditional drama school in Milan, and describes herself as 'a little bit like a magpie', drawing on the tradition of twentieth-century physical theatre, which treats the performer's body, more than the written line, as the primary site of meaning-making. Her influences include the Polish director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski, whose Poor Theatre stripped performance back to concentrate on the live, always unpredictable encounter between actor and spectator; Eugenio Barba, the Italian director and author whose exploration of performer training extended these ideas specifically beyond sites of state control; and the French movement teacher Jacques Lecoq, with his emphasis on the poetry of the spontaneous body, achieved through mime, mask work, and gesture. Working with director and performance artist Becka McFadden introduced Lara to Anne Bogart, whose Viewpoints provide actors with a shared vocabulary for improvising together in space and time. Although not a permanent member of the company, McFadden has remained an important artistic collaborator, bringing new influences into the rehearsal room, most recently through her research into the Japanese dance-theatre form Butoh, which deeply informed the company's 2025 production *The Flowers of Srebrenica*. Other collaborators have enriched the company's technique and applied theatre, while Angela Poulima helped develop the company's approach to physical comedy. Synthesising these diverse influences, LegalAliens has built a practice in which the visual and the verbal carry equal weight.[6] Their resulting aesthetic is visually bold and physically driven, blending text, movement, live music, video projection, and with an emphasis throughout on ensemble performance; an aesthetic that is fully in evidence in *Ali*. Such multiplicities are also a reason why the script can feel restless on the page: the work was never meant to sit still, to be in any way confined to a single, stable version.[7]

The Play as Political Theatre

Ali in Wonder(Eng)land takes Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and remakes it as a journey through the contemporary British immigration system. Lured down the rabbit hole by hopeful promises, Ali, an everyperson migrant whose precise origins are deliberately left uncertain, lands in a Wonder(Eng)land that looks welcoming but which is set up to work against him/her. The doors that meet Ali on arrival exist only to exclude; each unanswerable question they pose results in further blockages. As the company puts it, 'Carroll's Wonderland was always about a world whose rules exist to exclude. This one just has better paperwork'.[8] Yet the play's comedy can refashion what would otherwise be bureaucratic despair. The paperwork that excludes is, in the end, only paper, and the play never gives up on the hope that paper can be torn up and remade.

As a satire, the play is precise in its targets, each transposition taking on a specific feature of the real system. Carroll's little door becomes a checkpoint: the threshold of the 'welcoming place' Ali glimpses is in practice a mechanism designed to shut him/her out. The bottle marked 'DRINK ME' becomes a cup labelled 'NOT POISON'; '"Not poison, I hope so"', Ali says,

[4] 'Home', LegalAliens Theatre, <https://legalalienstheatre.com/>

[5] 'Ali in Wonder(Eng)land', LegalAliens Theatre, <https://legalalienstheatre.com/ali-in-wonderengland/>

[6] Lara Parmiani, 'Legal Aliens'.

[7] 'Home', LegalAliens Theatre.

[8] 'Ali in Wonder(Eng)land', LegalAliens Theatre.

drinking it anyway; having to swallow whatever the authorities hand him/her, Ali can only hope it does no harm.

Ali's uncontrollably changing size embodies the way the system tries to dictate what a migrant is: too big to be allowed to stay at one moment, too small to be believed an adult the next; never the right dimensions to fit in and to be left alone. The migrant body is sized by bureaucracy, removing agency from the person who actually lives in it. Carroll's croquet-playing courtiers become a chorus of bigots wielding 'anti foreigners glasses' that make migrants invisible to their wearers ('"You put them on and they disappear'"). The joke exposes the hidden cost of the desire for exclusion: one bigot realises with delight that the local barber and the Polish shop have vanished too, so that the fantasy of a country with foreigners removed is revealed to be as the fantasy of a country with its everyday life destroyed.

The well-meaning 'Virtue Signallers' are skewered just as sharply. They arrive to help but do anything but, mishearing Ali's name as '"Ala"', talking over him/her, and proposing to have Ali adopted because s/he is '"very instagrammable"'; they satirise of the way performed compassion can end up being just another form of erasure. The Mad Hatter's tea party becomes a frozen non-time, since Time himself has gone on strike ('"Idle workers are a big problem in this country"') in an image of the endless waiting the asylum system imposes; and the trial reproduces, almost to the letter, the Queen of Hearts' '"Sentence first—verdict afterwards"'.[9] The bleakest set-pieces are drawn straight from the apparatus of the British state: the Life in the United Kingdom citizenship test, restaged as a gameshow called 'Who Wants to Be a Wonderenglishan', and the looping references to the Rwanda removals scheme: '"try Rwanda […] You can't go, it was scrapped, trick question, keep up."'

Lara makes a bleak observation about how the play has aged in the few years since its first performance; when the company created it, she says, the characters were 'incredibly over the top', grotesque and exaggerated; but 'the world has changed to the point that that level of grotesque, that level of performative evil, is actually realism. It feels almost like we need to go even further because reality has caught up.'[10] This is the condition of satire in an escalating 'hostile environment', the phrase coined by the Home Office for the policy of deliberately making everyday life so difficult for people without secure status that they leave of their own accord, and since extended across migration policy.[11] Rather than lecturing the audience about that environment, the play exposes its absurd internal logic from the inside and lets the contradictions speak for themselves. Here is a nation that prides itself on being 'benign' and yet behaves with blatant open hostility; and a system whose rules are simultaneously inescapable and incoherent. As Peter Caterpillar, the play's streetwise mentor figure, tells Ali, '"It's not broken. It works exactly as they want it to."'

Ali is sharply observant in its references, naming visas, biometrics, citizenship tests, and the rhetoric of border control, as in the official voice that orders Ali to '"try Rwanda"', and the bigots who demand the country 'stop[s] the tunnels', with near-documentary accuracy. But it works as political theatre at a deeper level too, in its form as much as in its points of reference. Its restlessness of mode is part of the argument: narration slides into mime and farce into direct address; the imaginary fourth wall between stage and audience is broken so that Ali can step out of the story and refuse to perform a stunt ('I didn't come from Albania to break my neck in a theatre show'), in the process revealing the actor behind that moment's representation. None of this is merely for decoration, or surface comedy; the mixed modes are

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[9] Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, Chapter XII: 'Alice's Evidence', Millennium Fulcrum Edition, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/11/11-h/11-h.htm>

[10] Lara Parmiani, 'Legal Aliens'.

[11] The phrase 'hostile environment' originated within the Home Office: the then Home Secretary Theresa May used it in an interview with *The Telegraph*, 25 May 2012, declaring an aim to 'create, here in Britain, a really hostile environment for illegal migration', which was then extended across UK migration policy; it frames the references throughout the play to visas, biometrics, the Life in the United Kingdom test and the Rwanda removals scheme. See <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/theresa-may-interview-going-give-illegal-migrants-really-hostile/>

the dramaturgical correlate of the play's sustained refusal to let the migrant be fixed as a single, knowable, representable type. For Ali's changing size can also be read, more positively, about the resistance to classification, and the play's changing modes support this.

Writing Back and Writing Forward

Ali belongs to a recognisable literary strategy. To take a canonical English text and rewrite it from the standpoint of those it marginalises is what postcolonial criticism has called 'writing back'. The phrase derives from Salman Rushdie's punning essay title 'The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance' (1982) and from the influential study it gave its name to, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989).[12] The manoeuvre, in their account, has two stages: *abrogation*, the refusal of the centre's authority over 'correct' English (which is demoted to 'english') and its canon; and *appropriation*, the capturing and remoulding of that language and those forms 'to new usages'.[13] *Ali* both abrogates and appropriates *Alice*: it rejects the comfortable reading of Carroll's Wonderland as an innocent children's story and reconfigures it as a map of the border. Take the citizenship gameshow, which takes on the multiple-choice form of the Life in the United Kingdom test and turns it against itself: '"where are you really from? A) Where you don't claim to be from B) Where you say you don't come from C) Where I say you come from, or D) Other – please specify"'. The official language of testing is captured and remoulded until its absurdity is plainly exposed.

There's a danger though that the notion of 'writing back' might imply a purely combative relationship with the source, as though the new work exists only to talk back to the old. As John Thieme observes, the literature usually placed under that heading in practice tends to show 'a discursive dialectic operating along a continuum, in which the influence of the "original" could seldom be seen as simply adversarial'.[14] In other words, the response and original source are more likely to be in conversation than in combat: the new text borrows from the old, and can even delight in its energies, playing on the reader knowing it, even as it turns it to new ends. *Ali* bears this out: far from being straightforwardly hostile to Carroll, the play demonstrates playfulness in taking him on, and it uses the familiarity of the original as part of its satire. Carroll's Mock Turtle's song, 'said a whiting to a snail/ […]/ "You can really have no notion how delightful it will be/ When they take us up and throw us, with the lobsters, out to sea!"',[15] returns as a chillingly cheerful anthem of deportation, sung as a singalong with the lyrics projected as the audience is invited to join in: '"When they take them up and throw them back/ like lobsters, out to sea!/ […]/ The further off from Wonder(Eng)land the nearer is to France"'. It works more strongly if we recognise and indeed love the nonsense it perverts.

The play goes a lot further than reworking Carroll, and in doing so raises a more transformative notion: writing and performing *forward*. If writing back settles accounts with the past, writing forward uses the canon as raw material for imagining an alternative future. Adrienne Rich, writing about women returning to a literature that had largely been written without them, called such a move *re-vision*, 'the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction', and was clear that this is not reverence but release: 'not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us'.[16] The literary scholar Julie Sanders makes a related point about adaptation more broadly: rather than fixing a source in

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[12] Salman Rushdie, 'The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance'. *The Times*, 3 July 1982; Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (Routledge, 1989). On the remaking of English for new purposes, see also Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands' (1982), in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (Granta, 1991).

[13] Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, pp. 37-8.

[14] John Thieme, *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon* (Continuum, 2001), p. 2.

[15] Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*, Chapter X, 'The Lobster Quadrille'.

[16] Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision' 1971), *College English* 34.1 (1972), pp. 18-19.

its original place, the act of reworking it keeps it live as readers/ viewers take part 'in the play of similarity and difference', so that the canon is continually remade rather than statically inherited.[17]

This shift in preposition, from back to forward, has begun to be theorised within postcolonial studies, with a distinction drawn between the combative idea of 'writing back' and the more open, future-tilted work of 'reading forward'.[18] The distinction also echoes Edward Said's contrast between *filiation* (the inherited ties of birth, nationality, origin) and *affiliation*, 'a new form of relationship' formed from the networks we choose to forge.[19] *Ali* is an affiliative work in exactly this sense: it does not inherit *Alice* so much as it chooses it, and it builds from it a new and deliberately impure thing. Its multilingual, multi-bodied texture, audible in the Persian meditation on the word *jigar* ('liver'), the untranslated Spanish of the Venezuelan monologue ('Solo quería que me preguntara cómo me siento', 'I only wanted him to ask how I feel'), the chorizo litany in which an actor lists the one thing worth packing ('"Chorizo for breakfast […] Chorizo for lunch […] Chorizo for dinner"'), enacts the 'hybridity and syncreticity' (the mixing and merging of cultures and forms) that Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin place at the heart of postcolonial writing,[20] and it does so not to look back at a lost home but to assert a plural identity in the present. When Lara says she would rather make theatre 'not necessarily *about* migration' but 'about encounters and creating communities', and wonders when a person stops being 'an eternal migrant' and starts 'just being […] a Londoner', she is describing the affiliative, forward-facing impulse that the play's form embodies.[21]

Read this way, the central refusal of the play, that we are never told exactly who Ali is, comes more sharply into focus. The Martinican poet and thinker Édouard Glissant gave such refusal its most eloquent defence. Against a culture that treats understanding as a kind of classification system ('in order to understand and thus accept you, […] I have to reduce'), Glissant claimed for everyone a *right to opacity*: the right not to be fully transparent, knowable, summarised on someone else's terms.[22] The entire system the play satirises is, in Glissant's sense, a demand for transparency (however artificial the terms of that transparency are): the forms, the biometrics, the citizenship test all insist that Ali be rendered legible, sorted, tested – and as a result misnamed and mis-sized. The play, then, protects Ali's right to opacity, keeping him/her changing size, handing his/her blue top from body to body, letting a Persian word or an untranslated Spanish monologue play without subtitles. Crucially, Glissant did not mean opacity as a sad concession or a wall; he insisted it was something to affirm, even to celebrate, 'not the same as closing oneself off' but rather, 'let it be a celebration' as the grounds for a relationship between equals.[23] Facing forwards, the play does not ask the audience to understand the migrant better and feel duly sorry, which would leave the old machinery of judgement intact; rather, it asks them to give up the demand to understand people completely at all.

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[17] Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Routledge, 2016), p. 57.

[18] See, for example, Laura A. Zander, *Writing Back/ Reading Forward: Reconsidering the Postcolonial Approach* (Peter Lang, 2019).

[19] Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 19.

[20] Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, p. 78.

[21] Lara Parmiani, 'Legal Aliens'.

[22] Édouard Glissant, 'For Opacity', in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 190.

[23] Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*, trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 16-17.

The Method Is the Meaning

If the printed text is best read as a record of how *Ali* was made, then four features of its construction repay close attention. Each provides insight into how the play was built, and how its practice forms a part of its meaning. Together these features illuminate a collaborative, body-centred way of working, adding up to a sustained argument about who a migrant is, and who gets to say so.

Personal Monologues. Ali's journey is interleaved with first-person monologues spoken by the actors, more or less as themselves: the Venezuelan neighbour who is slowly transformed by toxic news headlines, the Persian speaker for whom the expression '"my liver burned"' bears the burden of a friend shot during protests, the Italian who bought a poster of England as a teenager in admiration, 'before Thatcher, before "the hostile environment"'. The notion of unified character gives way to the lived experience of the performers. They provide ballast against the misrepresentations, and depth beyond the cartoon velocity of the satire, bringing to the fore, movingly, the unique, untranslatable reality of individual lives. Anti-tokenism is built into the play's structure as 'the migrant' is transformed from being a subject into a self-representing author.

The Multiple Casting of Ali. The role of Ali is played by alternating performers, male and female, from across the whole company; the switches are signified by costume changes, as a blue top of varying sizes is passed from one actor to the next between scenes, in full view of the audience. The switches illustrate the central idea that there is no single Ali, no representative migrant whose story could stand for all others. The role passing from body to body resists the idea of representation as repetition. The casting device performs the same resistance to fixing identities that the positive reading of the changing-size motif performs within the fictional world; it replaces the idea of identity as propriety with the idea that it is contingent, relational, endlessly variable.

Lewis Carroll as a Frame. *Alice in Wonderland* offers a fictional world already structured around arbitrary rules, impenetrable authority, and the loss of individual control, symbolised by the terrifying mutability of the body; its world is already shaped uncannily like the asylum system. Using a text a British audience likely already knows allows the company to satirise more readily, and at more levels, turning national cultural property into an instrument for national self-critique. *Alice* also provides the production with an immediate visual vocabulary, of holes, chases, doors, potions, and the Cheshire grin of officialdom, that its animated projections, voiceovers, and live music enhance. In taking the il/logic as a central concern, *Ali* is part of a counter-tradition of reading *Alice* against the grain. Critics and philosophers have long read Carroll's books as centrally concerned with the (mis)workings of rules, logic, and arbitrary authority: Gilles Deleuze made *Alice* central in these regards to his study *Logic of Sense* (1969), while Jean-Jacques Lecercle, in *Philosophy of Nonsense* (1994), proposes that Victorian nonsense is structured by the very rule-bound, authority-led logic it appears to flout. Wonderland always was a world of perverse, unanswerable questions and irrational, unappealable verdicts; the play has only to take the journey and all its blockages to the border for the resemblance to the asylum system to appear.

Formal Restlessness. The play's form contributes to its continual sense of restlessness. The slippage between enactment and narration, farce and testimony, English and other languages, one Ali and the next, are the formal counterpart of the play's refusal to let the migrant congeal into a type. Instead, the emphasis is on active making and remaking.

Spatial theorists provide ways of viewing the border not as a fixed fact of geography but as something continuously *produced*; by authorities in the form of paperwork, queues, tests

and slogans; but therefore also as something that might be produced *otherwise*.[24] When, at the play's end, Ali determines that the Quing is '"made of paper and empty words"', and the whole paper architecture of the border collapses, the power of the state quite literally falls. The company knows the ending comes too fast, and brings such artifice to the fore at the end of *Ali*'s 2024 companion piece *Tugging at the Sea*, through a read-aloud letter of complaint answered with the rueful line, '"I only wish it would take so little to change people's minds and open their hearts"'.[25] Implausibility is the point. The farce form lets the play hold open, as a thought-experiment, the possibility of unmaking a border that real life makes so cruelly rigid.

There is at work here something of what the theatre scholar Jill Dolan calls the 'utopian performative', the way live performance can conjure a better world as a shared feeling. Such a moment on stage lets an audience feel, at least for the length of a scene, not what a better world would look like in precise detail but what it might feel like, in a brief, embodied rehearsal of 'what if' rather than what is.[26] When the paper border falls, the play is not predicting that it will; it's letting us experience, for a moment, the feeling that it could. And it's that felt possibility, briefly made real through the performance, that an audience experiences, and may even carry forwards.

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What follows, then, is a record of a living, collaborative, still-evolving work; the company continues to restage and revise it, and any future production will rightly remake it again in the bodies of whoever performs it, in the context of the present moment.[27] The text is offered as a documented methodology: a score for others to learn from, argue with, and practise anew.

The border Ali crosses is built of paperwork, of visas and tests and the booklet that decides who belongs; but at the play's end, Ali blows that paper architecture down, even if it's only temporary, and walks through the door on his/her own terms, under his/her own name. The text you hold is paper of a different kind: not a document that sorts and excludes, but a score, offered to be picked up, marked, and remade. If Wonder(Eng)land runs on better paperwork, this is the better kind altogether: an invitation rather than a barrier, paper that opens a door and asks you to keep it open.

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[24] I have written elsewhere about the border as a produced and therefore reversible space in migrant theatre, with a debt to Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Doreen Massey and Joanne Tompkins (see <https://nul.repository.guildhe.ac.uk/id/eprint/2181/>).

[25] LegalAliens, *Tugging at the Sea* (2024).

[26] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 149.

[27] *Ali in Wonder(Eng)land* was revived at Jacksons Lane, London, on 14–15 July 2026.