

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 it. It cannot be fully separated 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 exists fully only in performance, a set of instructions waiting to be brought to life rather than a finished object. This script – or better, score – has a more radical relation to performance. It's less a blueprint that a future production would follow than a record of the method by which one particular company made the work; as much an account of how the piece was built as a set of lines to be spoken. The reader holds the residues of a process: of improvisations, debates, false starts, and the irreducible particularity of bodies in rehearsal and in performance.¹ This introduction is offered as a

¹ On the publication of devised and ensemble work as the documentation of a process rather than a reproducible blueprint, see,

companion to the text, containing 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, a designation given by the charity City of Sanctuary UK to arts organisations that commit to welcoming people seeking refuge and embedding that welcome in their work.

The name carries a joke with a sting in it. Working on an early project, Lara discovered that in English bureaucratic language the word 'alien' is used not for creatures from outer space but for human beings, for anyone who is not a citizen of the United Kingdom.² The discovery shocked her, and the company name grew out of it; the phrase is a wink at the audience and a way of 'making sure that everyone knows how ridiculous it is that human beings are called alien'.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 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

for example, Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments: Contemporary Performance and Forced Entertainment* (London: Routledge, 1999).

² The legal substance behind the joke is real: the British Nationality Act 1981 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).

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

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

Lara's own practice is deliberately eclectic. Trained both academically and at a traditional drama school in Milan, she describes herself as 'a little bit like a magpie', drawing on the twentieth-century lineage of physical theatre, the tradition that treats the performer's body, rather than the written line, as the primary material of meaning. Her touchstones are the practitioners who built that tradition: the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski and his collaborator Eugenio Barba, who stripped theatre back to its irreducible essential, the live encounter between actor and spectator, and trained performers to express meaning through the disciplined body rather than elaborate sets or text; the French movement teacher Jacques Lecoq, whose influence reaches her by way of the British company Complicité, and whose pedagogy builds performance from mime, mask and gesture; and the American director Anne Bogart, whose 'Viewpoints' give actors a shared vocabulary for improvising together in space and time. From these she has built a practice that engages words and movement in equal measure.⁶ That magpie aesthetic, 'visually bold, physically driven', blending 'text, movement, live image, music and ensemble performance', is everywhere in the pages that follow, and it is one reason the script can feel restless on the page: it was never meant to sit still.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

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

⁶ Lara Parmiani, 'Legal Aliens'.

⁷ 'Home', LegalAliens Theatre.

contemporary British immigration system. Lured down the rabbit hole by the bright promises with which this introduction began, Ali, an everyperson migrant whose precise origins are deliberately left uncertain, lands in a Wonder(Eng)land that looks welcoming but which is built to work against him/her. The doors that meet Ali on arrival exist to exclude, and each unanswerable question ends in removal. 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 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 holds on to the thought that paper can be torn up and remade.

The satire is precise in its targets, and each transposition lands on a recognisable feature of the real system. Carroll's little door becomes a checkpoint: the threshold of the 'welcoming place' Ali glimpses is also the mechanism that shuts him/her out, since to pass through it s/he must first answer questions designed to be unanswerable. The bottle marked 'DRINK ME' becomes a cup labelled 'NOT POISON'; "'Not poison, I hope so'", Ali says, drinking it anyway, having to swallow whatever the authorities hand him/her and hoping it does no harm.

Ali's uncontrollable changes of size literalise the way the system itself decides what a migrant is: too big to be detained one moment, too small to be believed an adult the next, never the right dimensions to fit through the door. The body is sized by the bureaucracy, never by the person who lives in it. The croquet-playing courtiers become a chorus of bigots wielding 'anti foreigners glasses' that simply make migrants vanish from view ("You put them on and they disappear"). The joke turns on what the wish for invisibility actually costs: one bigot realises with delight that the local barber and the Polish shop have vanished too, so that the fantasy of a country with the foreigners removed is also a fantasy of a country with its everyday life destroyed.

The well-meaning 'Virtue Signallers' are skewered just as sharply. They arrive to help and make everything worse,

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

mishearing Ali's name as "Ala", talking over him/her, and proposing to have Ali adopted because s/he is "very instagrammable", a satire of the way performed compassion can be its own form of erasure. The Mad Hatter's tea party becomes a frozen non-time in which Time himself has gone on strike after an argument ("Idle workers are a big problem in this country"), 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 striking 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 its audience about that

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

environment, the play renders its absurd internal logic from the inside and lets the contradictions speak for themselves. Here is a nation that prides itself on being 'benign' even as it behaves with open hostility, and a system whose rules are at once 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 we 'stop the tunnels', with near-documentary accuracy. But it works as political theatre at a deeper level too, in its form as much as in those references. Its restlessness of mode is itself 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'). Nothing is mere decoration; the mixed modes are the dramaturgical correlate of the play's central refusal to let the migrant be fixed as a single, knowable, representable type. Ali's changing size can also be read, more positively, about the resistance to classification; the play changes mode for the same reason.

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*

<<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/theresa-may-interview-going-give-illegal-migrants-really-hostile/>>

(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* abrogates and appropriates *Alice* at the same time: it refuses the comfortable reading of Carroll's Wonderland as harmless children's nonsense and reoccupies it as a map of the border. (Whether the Alice books were ever innocent is itself open to question.) Take the citizenship gameshow, which seizes 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 plain.

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 rewriting and its source remain in conversation rather than in combat: the new text leans on the old, borrows its energy and its pleasures, and depends on the reader knowing it, even as it turns it to new ends. *Ali* bears this out. Far from being merely hostile to Carroll, it can be delighted by him, and it relies on the

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*, p. 38.

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

audience's affection for the original to land 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 on the wall: "'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.

And so the play invites a further idea, one that turns the familiar phrase around: writing and performing *forward*. Writing back settles accounts with the past; writing forward uses the canon as raw material for imagining a different future. Adrienne Rich, writing about women returning to a literature that had largely been written without them, called it *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 in general: rather than fixing a source in place, the act of reworking it keeps it in motion as readers/ viewers take part 'in the play of similarity and difference', and the canon is continually remade rather than merely inherited.¹⁷

The shift in preposition, from back to forward, has itself become a line of argument within postcolonial criticism, where readers have begun to set the combative idea of 'writing back' against the more open, future-tilted work of 'reading forward'.¹⁸

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.

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).

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*, 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, something that might otherwise look like mere evasiveness comes into focus: the play never tells us exactly who *Ali* is, and that withholding is deliberate. The Martinican poet and thinker Édouard Glissant gave such refusal a name and a 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 whole apparatus the play satirises is, in Glissant's sense, a demand for

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.

transparency: the forms, the biometrics, the citizenship test all insist that Ali be rendered legible, sorted, misnamed, mis-sized and tested at every turn. The play's answer is not to make Ali finally knowable but to protect his/her opacity, keeping him/her changing size, handing his/her blue top from body to body, letting a Persian word or an untranslated Spanish monologue sit on stage 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 This is to face 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; it asks them to give up the demand to understand people completely at all.

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 turn a collaborative, body-centred way of working into 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 news headlines, the Persian speaker for whom the expression "my liver burned" carries the weight of a friend shot during protests, the Italian who bought a poster of England as a teenager 'before Thatcher, before "the hostile environment"'. These are not characters in the usual sense; they are derived from the lived experience of the performers. They function as ballast: against the cartoon velocity of the satire, they

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

insist on the singular, untranslatable reality of particular lives. The company's anti-tokenism is made structural; the migrant is not the subject of these passages, but rather the author of them.

The Multiple Casting of Ali. Ali is played by alternating performers, male and female, the costume (a blue top) handed from one actor to the next between scenes, in full view. This renders the play's central idea visible: there is no single Ali, no representative migrant whose story could stand for all the others; the role passes from body to body precisely so that it cannot congeal into a type. The casting device performs the same resistance to fixed representation that the positive reading of the changing-size motif performs within the fiction. Identity is shown to be relational and distributed, rather than proprietary.

Lewis Carroll as a Frame. Carroll is not chosen arbitrarily, but rather offers a pre-existing world organised entirely around arbitrary rules, nonsensical authority and the sudden, terrifying mutability of the body; a world already uncannily shaped like the asylum system. The frame lets the company satirise a bureaucratic reality through a story the British audience already holds dear, turning national cultural property into the instrument of national self-critique. It also gives the production a ready visual vocabulary, doors, holes, playing-card courtiers, a Cheshire grin of officialdom, that its animated projections and live music amplify. Again there are intersections with previous readings against the grain. Critics and philosophers have long taken the Alice books to be precisely about rules, logic and arbitrary authority: Gilles Deleuze made Carroll the central case of his *Logic of Sense* (1969), and Jean-Jacques Lecercle's *Philosophy of Nonsense* (1994) shows how Victorian nonsense is structured by the very rule-bound, authority-driven logic it appears to flout. Wonderland, in other words, was already a world of unanswerable questions and sudden, unappealable verdicts; the play has only to position that machinery at the border for the resemblance to the asylum system to appear.

Formal Restlessness. The restlessness noted earlier is a vital part of the method. The slippage between narration and enactment, farce and testimony, English and other languages, one Ali and the next, are not stylistic mannerisms but the formal counterpart of the play's refusal to let the migrant be reduced to a single representation.

A more conventional, single-authored, well-made play would have had to choose: one protagonist, one register, one story. *Ali* declines the choice. Spatial theorists allow us to see the border not as a fixed fact of geography but as something continuously *produced*, by paperwork, queues, tests and slogans; and therefore 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 set quite literally falls. The company knows the ending comes too fast, and says so, in *Ali*'s 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 reversibility of a border that real life makes so cruelly hard to move.

There is at work here something of what the theatre scholar Jill Dolan calls the 'utopian performative', the way live performance can briefly conjure a better world as a shared feeling in the room – something the audience undergoes together. Such a moment on stage lets an audience feel, for the length of a scene, not what a better world would look like in detail but what it might feel like, in a brief, embodied rehearsal of 'what

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).

if' rather than what is.²⁶ When the paper border falls, the play is not predicting that it will; it is letting us experience, for a moment, the feeling that it could. And it is that felt possibility, briefly made real in the room, that the performance leaves its audience holding.

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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.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 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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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, 14–15 July 2026.