


Manus: Harrowing accounts of lives in limbo

By **MURRAY BRAMWELL**

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Devised and performed by the Iranian Verbatim Theatre Group from Tehran, *Manus* tells the stories of eight asylum-seekers fleeing persecution and personal risk in Iran, and the events leading to their indefinite incarceration on Nauru and then Manus Island.

Director, researcher and performer Nazanin Sahamizadeh is the company's driving force and the text for *Manus* has been gathered from her mobile phone interviews and WhatsApp exchanges with internees. These were facilitated by Behrouz Boochani, the Iranian-Kurdish journalist and poet whose vivid account of his life on Manus, *No Friend but the Mountains*, also written on WhatsApp, won the prestigious Victorian Prize for Literature in January.

The eight excellent performers, three women and five men, wait quietly for the audience to arrive. Then, fleetingly bathed in harsh spotlights, they step out of the curtained surrounds of the stage and, in Persian with English surtitles, begin their narratives.

Each carries a bright red jerrycan, depicting meagre belongings, or a flotation device or, later, fuel for protest. They stand, or sit, facing us, delivering threads of language that weave tragedy.

These are educated people with careers and families. People like us, suffering violence, medical neglect, self-harm and harrowing deaths. "We ruined ourselves," one says. "We came here to be ruined." "The first question they ask us is: 'Do you want to kill yourself?' " And, confrontingly for its first audience in this country: "Manus is run by Australia."

This work is compelling in its quiet veracity: people talking directly of their hopes for better lives, deceived by smugglers, then detained in timeless limbo. Boochani, powerfully represented in his absence by Ehsan Bayatfar, is commandingly present in words.

His poem, describing climbing a tree and threatening to jump unless the authorities play Mozart, crystallises the human struggle for recognition, dignity and truth. This is stark, matter-of-fact and shaming theatre.