

The US lawyer helping Middle East performers break Donald Trump's travel ban

For artists from the Middle East, bringing their acts to the US has proven near impossible – until now



Vera Gurpinar blows out candles as she performs in *The Jungle*, alongside Ben Turner and Mohammad Amiri. Courtesy Teddy Wolff



Rob Crilly

January 15, 2019

Updated: January 17, 2019

Moein Ghobsheh strides on stage at St Ann's Warehouse theatre in New York every evening, playing the role of Omid, a 21-year-old Iranian refugee trying to reach England from the sprawling camp that once existed outside Calais, known as The Jungle.

The play – also called *The Jungle* – is winning rave reviews for its gritty authenticity since transferring from London at the end of last year.

But the story is all too real for Ghobsheh. He is telling his own story on stage. He fled Iran and only reached the UK after months of danger and uncertainty, by risking his life inside a refrigerated truck for 12 hours as it made the journey across the Channel.

The play, by two young British playwrights, was an obvious transfer from London to New York – another liberal city in a country grappling with populist leaders and their warnings about the dangers posed by an impending flood of immigrants.

The play describes with raw emotion the story of how the camp grew as new arrivals from Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia and other troubled parts of the world sought the safety of Britain, before the camp was torn down by French authorities in 2016.

Legal troubles coming to the US

For Ghobsheh, arriving in the UK to claim asylum did not mean the end of his legal struggles. The actor, as well as another Iranian cast member and a Syrian, initially fell foul of President Donald Trump's travel ban in the US. As citizens of blacklisted countries (alongside the Muslim majority countries Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen, plus North Korea and Venezuela) they were ineligible for visas to enter the country.

What followed was a groundbreaking legal gambit that combined the full force of celebrity supporters with some lateral thinking. Its success not only meant that the show would go on but that more artists, intellectuals and performers will be able to work in the US despite the ban.

The plan was hatched by Matthew Covey, a former punk musician in Eastern Europe turned immigration fixer and lawyer, who for the past 20 years has helped visiting artists find a way through American red tape.



Yasin Moradi shoots for 'The Jungle' at St Ann's Warehouse. Courtesy Teddy Wolff

His law firm and non-profit Tamizdat are run from one of the fashionable former industrial units that line the Brooklyn waterfront, around the corner from St Ann's Warehouse.

Last year, Covey was contacted by a Syrian dance troupe based in Paris for help getting to a performance in Cincinnati. As he pored over the legal documents, he realised the Trump administration was willing to allow waivers if the visit was in the "national interest", without explaining exactly what that meant.

"How do you show that a performance by an artist is in the national interest?" said Covey. "When there's no guidance at all: there's no explanation of what that means or how to evaluate it?"

A surprising victory

The performance in Cincinnati was funded by the Ohio Arts Council, and Covey argued that cancelling the show would mean squandering public money, which would act against the

national interest.

It worked, much to his surprise, although approval came too late for the troupe to get the security clearance they needed. More surprising still was that Covey was contacted by the Paris embassy, who let him know that the waiver – one of the very first under the new regulations – had been issued.

Covey was confident that the strategy would work again. “That was really positive, and it wasn’t more than a week or two later that St Ann’s came to us and said there’s this play that we really want to bring over,” he said.



Nahel Tzegai and Jo McInnes. Courtesy Teddy Wolff

That proved to be more complicated. As well as Ghobsheh, the cast includes Ammar Haj Ahmad, an actor from Damascus who arrived in the UK as a refugee, and Yasin Moradi, a kung fu master from Iran whose talents were spotted when he was living in The Jungle.

Although the production would use some public funding, it represented a drop in the ocean of New York state arts budgets, making the same case harder to land.

Instead, Covey decided to use the “national interest” requirement from a part of immigration law unrelated to the ban – the EB-2 visa, or green card. “And that requires experts in the field, which is where Benedict Cumberbatch, Sting, and all these people came in,” he said.

Help from some (celebrity) friends

If the green card requires testimonials proving the value of an immigrant to the US, then why not deploy the same principle for *The Jungle* actors? Only, instead of using business referees, world-famous performers would make the case for bringing the play to New York.

Sting and his wife Trudie Styler were among those who wrote to the head of visa services at the US embassy in London, saying: “It is without doubt a seminal piece of theatre with significant artistic merit and national importance, representing the cutting edge of theatre being made in the world today.”

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, also backed the O-2 visa application. Covey was successful once again.

Since then he has helped Nassim Soleimanpour, the Iranian playwright, bring a production to New York, and Covey has two more applications under way.

“It’s very specific to the arts,” he said. “If you are trying to get your grandmother through the ban, this is going to be completely useless. But if you are at university and have National Endowment for the Humanities funding to bring over a visiting professor from Somalia, that should work.”

The Jungle has been playing to packed houses ever since it opened last month. The stage is built inside a tent that was first used by a volunteer theatre group in the real Jungle, and features an Afghan cafe that became the cultural and political hub of the camp.

For Ghobsheh, it is all a reminder of the three months he spent in the camp watching the lights of Britain shining in the distance. “All that happened in the Jungle is in the cafe,” he said.

Read more:

[US lawsuit challenges Trump travel ban](#)

[Yemeni mother who fought Trump travel ban says goodbye to son](#)

[On the move: Sad but oddly satisfying encounters with ignorance](#)

Updated: January 17, 2019 05:29 PM