



Photograph by Olivier Lahan-Mattet/UNHCR

# TROJAN FORCE

*Charlotte Eagar observed tragedy as a foreign correspondent. Now she's using Greek tragedy to help displaced Syrian women find a voice — and joy*



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Chris said, “Charlotte, nobody cares,” and I looked at him and I stamped my foot and I said, “We must *make* them care!” Charlotte Eagar, laid up in her Notting Hill flat with torn ankle ligaments, is not doing much foot-stamping at present, but she is certainly making people care. As co-founder of the Syria Trojan Women Project, she has brought the *Trojan Women*, that ancient Greek tragedy, to a place afflicted by recent real tragedy, making female refugees from Assad and from ISIS into actors — and helping them to find identity and even joy through art.

Euripides’ play, two and a half thousand years old, tells of the noblewomen like Hecuba, queen of Troy, who face deportation into sex-slavery after the Greeks have conquered; they have lost possessions, positions, safety, sometimes sanity — and home. War has driven them from their homes, and it doesn’t take a Method actor to understand how the women of Syria now living in Jordan could put in convincing performances.

For Charlotte, the project grew out of her passion and her profession. A foreign correspondent previously much found in war zones (she does not like the term ‘war correspondent’), she had reported from

the Romanian revolution in 1989 while still studying Classics at Oxford, before going to the Balkans in 1992 while the Yugoslav War raged. ‘I went straight to Bosnia on an InterRail ticket,’ Charlotte says, ‘and the *Mail* gave me a flak jacket and a computer and accredited me.’

Her foot-stamping in fact came when she was trying to persuade the *Mail* that it should send her to the Balkans. An exiled Yugoslav prince, father of a friend of hers, had told Charlotte about the ‘beautiful town’ of Dubrovnik being shelled in a ‘terrible war’ by the Serbs. Her work as part of the press corps there, including during the siege of Sarajevo and in the Serbs’ concentration camps, kept international eyes on the ramifying crisis: the West would have ‘left it to rot’ without the press.

Further conflict spots have followed, including the opium fields of Afghanistan and Kiev soon after independence from the Soviet Union, and it was in her kitchen in Kiev where Euripides resurfaced. ‘There was a production of *The Trojan Women* on the radio, and because I was straight out of Oxford, Classics was still what I was really thinking about... I listened to it and I remember thinking, “My god, this is exactly the same and nothing has changed. All these stories are the same stories I’ve been listening to all summer: rape, murder, loss, exile. Nothing has changed at all — what an extraordinary play this is.”’ It was a quarter of a century before she could give a full weight of meaning to it.

## SCREEN TEST

It hasn’t been all war zones and genocide. Charlotte has twice worked at *Tatler* and wrote investigative pieces for *ES Magazine*, before moving into screenwriting. She and her husband, Willy Stirling (a recent contributor to *Spear’s*), wrote a short rom-com called *Scoterman* in 2010 — Charlotte played Grumpy Academic Woman — and it did rather well: ‘To our amazement, [it] got into Cannes and then won Best of the Fest at Palm Springs and the LA Comedy Festival, and was optioned in America.’

Charlotte and Willy decided to give writing for films a proper go, ‘and then we waited for stardom to hit us. And it didn’t.’ But while they waited, Marks & Spencer asked them to make training films for its vegetable packers, who lived on ‘the largest rubbish dump in Africa’, Dandora in Nairobi. (‘It’s about the size of Hyde Park.’) Instead of dry motivational films, they created a cross between *The Archers* and *The Simpsons*: a soap opera where the tribulations of an amusingly dysfunctional family taught lessons about leadership and taking control of your own destiny. But it was the medium, rather than the message, which helped the vegetable packers seize their future.

‘We noticed two things very profoundly,’ says Charlotte. ‘One was the extraordinary effect that the process had had on the people we were involved with. They had become much more self-confident, they had a really nice time, they got some money



because they were being paid by M&S to do this, they got new opportunities.’ Some were even offered scholarships to film school. ‘The other thing we noticed was that they’d also actually put on incredibly strong, powerful performances, because they were playing people who were like themselves.’

## BRIEF ENCOUNTER

Charlotte was thrilled by the power that her inadvertent drama therapy had had on the workers, but she felt ‘a bit awful’ because ‘you sprinkle stardust with a screenplay and then you walk away.’ It is this problem — the brevity of the uplift — that has coloured the course of the Syria Trojan Women Project.

When Charlotte and Willy later asked Oxfam if it needed any films made, the charity said they should try a project with Syrian refugees. According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees, there are now over 600,000 registered Syrian refugees in Jordan, a poor, dry country already swamped with waves from Iraq. (The BBC puts the number at 1.3 million.) It was then that the pair — both Classicists — recalled *The Trojan Women*.

For actresses, they did not go to the UN camp, ‘a volatile and violent place’, but into the capital, Amman, where women were more isolated. They went round UN food queues and Oxfam community centres, asking women if they were interested in being in their play, and on the first day twelve women turned up; the next day, twenty; the third day, 50; and then they had to start turning them away.

They had bigger, cannier ambitions than simply a film of the drama this time: they would make a documentary about the process. ‘Essentially the documentary hedges the project, because documentaries thrive on disaster. So the more disasters we have, the better the documentary will be. I can imagine this voice saying, “William has never directed a play before, and does not speak Arabic.”’

This documentary, *Queens of Syria*, won best director for Yasmin Fedda at the Abu Dhabi Film >>

ABOVE:  
SYRIAN WOMEN  
PERFORM IN THE  
TROJAN WOMEN  
IN AMMAN.  
TOP RIGHT:  
CHARLOTTE  
EAGAR IN  
WAR-TORN  
SARAJEVO IN 1993



LEFT: THERE WAS NO SHORTAGE OF EXILES INTERESTED IN TAKING PART IN THE PLAY

» Festival last autumn. (Charlotte and Willy will be making a feature film of the play with Arab actors this year too.)

This hedging was an attractive aspect to the project's philanthropic backers, who included, aptly, many hedge-fund managers; they put up the £150,000 needed. Prospero World, a not-for-profit company which helps philanthropists pick worthy causes for their money, put Charlotte in touch with its donors, who appreciated the idea that whether it went well or badly, there would be a film regardless. They also 'wanted to do something for Syrians that didn't involve just giving them a blanket, that involved giving them some kind of dignity and, yes, a voice.'

This voice is doubly potent. Women who, back in Syria, had no public role could now speak their lines in front of their community; the patriarchy which kept them silent was upended when it could not protect or feed them. Some women who used to wear the niqab — which covers the face except for the eyes — switched to the hijab as a sign of liberation.

But they could also use the play to process their trauma: 'A lot of the women who we worked with said, "We were Hecuba, we were queens in our own homes, and suddenly that's gone."' As these women reclaimed their dignity and some even came through depression, they also adjusted to their new humility.

### TWIST IN THE TALE

Now Charlotte has found a second project for refugees: *Oliver!*, the Lionel Bart musical based on Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. This may sound unlikely — it's

hardly as grave as Euripides — but the harmonies are clear and it has been updated to a modern Arab city, rife with streetkids. 'It's [about] a young child... being dragged away from his real place in the world and faced with temptations, and — lo! — he comes forth through his integrity and has a happy ending.' *Oliver!* will occupy five or six months this year and a hundred children, mostly Syrian but also Jordanian, Palestinian and Iraqi.

Charlotte wants to do a documentary and, crucially, an album, which she hopes will sell sufficiently to make her work self-sustaining. It all needs another £45,000 of funding, although it has already been supported by Cameron Mackintosh (who owns the rights), and donors can take advantage of SEIS relief. It would take a hard heart to resist a little Syrian child singing *Where Is Love?*.

Towards the end of our first conversation, Charlotte talks of this project helping her to give something back, so I ask her what she has taken in the first place. 'I took a career. You take people's memories, you take people's stories, and then you leave them, and so this is trying to take people's stories and turn them into something for them, perhaps, as well.'

Charlotte is being unfair on herself: perhaps some of her journalism was, as they say, the next day's fish-and-chip paper, but some of it made a real difference, just like her theatrical projects. It's unlikely that anyone who has participated in *The Trojan Women* or *Oliver!*, or even seen them, will not find themselves changed. *f*

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