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Reclaiming Political Agency: Using Theatre as Resistance

Based on a new version of Sophocles' Antigone, Nikita argues that theatre can help activists move past the 'narrative trap' that portrays excluded groups as victims, depriving them of voice and agency.

"Whose lives are considered valuable? Whose lives are mourned, and whose lives are considered ungrievable?" – **Judith Butler**

Judith Butler's interrogation of *Antigone*, Sophocles' classic drama of civil disobedience and state power, poses a question that haunts the contemporary landscape of global migration. It highlights a significant barrier for those seeking to change stubborn policies: the narrative. When a group is consistently framed as victims or problems, their political agency is erased, making systemic change difficult.

In the UK, the tension between "essential labour" and "ungrievable lives" is perhaps most visible in the plight of Migrant Domestic Workers (MDWs). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates there are over **75 million domestic workers globally – a workforce that is overwhelmingly female**. Over the last decade, their legal standing in the UK has suffered a profound and deliberate retrenchment, effectively stripping rights from the very people tasked with caring for the UK's households.

The Narrative Trap of Policy

Before 2012, migrant domestic workers in the UK held a visa that allowed them to change employers – a fundamental labour right that provided a **critical exit route from exploitation**. The 2012 immigration overhaul tied the workers' immigration status to their specific employer, a policy justified as part of a broader **hostile environment** towards migrants.

Research has consistently shown that such tying systematically increases their **vulnerability to abuse** and **modern slavery**. This policy shift has a distinctly gendered impact, exploiting the

socioeconomic position of women who dominate the sector.

Beyond the material harm, this legislative shift accomplished a dangerous discursive move: it reframed MDWs from “workers” with rights to potential “victims” under the Modern Slavery Act, a frame that erases political agency. This echoes a wider pattern where **immigration law often produces the very “illegality” it claims to police**, constructing migrants as subjects of charity rather than bearers of rights. The challenge, then, is not just to critique the policy but to dismantle this disempowering story and build a new one from the ground up.



Waling Waling Drama Group's performance of Antigone at Omnibus Theatre, April 2025

Theatre as a Means of Resistance

So how do you move past this narrative trap? Traditional policy analysis, which often relies on static categories and top-down data, frequently **fails to capture the real, lived experiences** of these workers. As a result, both activists and scholars are increasingly turning to **participatory arts-based methods** to understand how marginalised groups contest their legal status and state bureaucracy.

It is within this gap, between statutory definition and human reality, that **Waling Waling Drama Group's** production of **Antigone** emerges. Directed by **Cheryl Gallacher** and **Drashti Shah** in collaboration with the **Waling Waling Drama Group** – a collective of women MDWs – this **Arts Council England-funded** project uses participatory theatre as a deliberate, multi-stage theory of change.

Reclaiming the Narrative

The project's core focus is on strategic narrative substitution. Instead of arguing against the “tied visa” with policy briefs alone, the women of Waling Waling Drama Group reinterpret Sophocles' *Antigone*. In the play, Antigone defies King Creon's unjust decree forbidding her brother's burial. In the workshop process, this is reframed: Creon's law becomes the UK's 2012 immigration rules.

Drashti Shah, a specialist in creative art therapies and a migrant worker herself, explains the deliberate choice:

"The genius of the Waling Waling Drama group was to reframe the 'employer tie' not as a bureaucratic rule, but as Creon's decree – an unjust law demanding civil disobedience. This reframing was powerful; it allowed the women to articulate their resistance not as helpless victims, but as political actors. Our role was to create the safe, structured space for that translation from experience to art to policy demand."

Drashti's point gets to the core of their approach: By using a culturally resonant story, they bypass defensive policy debates and connect directly with audiences, including policymakers, on a deeper, ethical level. It transforms a complex immigration issue into a timeless question of justice and moral duty.

Claiming the Stage

This creative approach extends beyond rewriting the script. Since 2024, the group has taken their work from the headquarters of **Unite the Union** to established cultural venues such as the **Omnibus Theatre**. By occupying these civic spaces, the project drags the discourse from the private household to the public stage, asserting visibility for a workforce that the state often considers invisible.

This project positions the workers as artists on a professional stage, not just protesters or claimants. It attracts arts reviewers, cultural funders, and a public audience that might not attend a political rally. A theatre creates an empathetic space where people are primed to engage emotionally and intellectually. Moreover, occupying a public cultural institution is a powerful act of visibility. It declares that the lives and labour of migrant women are not a hidden, private issue, but a matter of public, civic importance.

This approach aligns with a growing understanding that "voice" is not just about speaking, but about **being heard and recognised within a community**. For domestic workers excluded from the UK Employment Rights Bill, the stage becomes a platform for authoring their own narratives, substituting the parliamentary representation they are denied.

Conclusion

The Waling Waling Drama Group's production of Antigone (*performing again on 16 December at St Margaret's House* in East London) serves as a critical focal point for International Migrants Day, but its significance runs deeper than a single performance. It is a practical demonstration of how lasting policy change begins with narrative change. The project reveals that the individuals most affected by unjust laws are not just claimants – they are also the most insightful analysts and compelling narrators of their own struggles. Building their agency through creative collaboration isn't an aside; it is the essential first step in any meaningful change.

For policymakers, the lesson is clear: migration governance cannot be understood solely through the lens of border control. It must be reckoned with through the rights, dignity, and political creativity of the workers already here.

As the UK reflects on its treatment of migrants this December, the question remains: will the law continue to construct domestic workers as “ungrievable,” or will it finally recognise them as workers?

About the author

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