

SCRIPT

THE CERTIFICATE

a monologue by a stateless child



written by
RUWANTHIE DE CHICKERA

Based on interviews conducted with stateless children
by the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion

stages
theatre
group

The Certificate

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The Certificate

First public performance 2017
A Stages Theatre Group presentation

First published (online) 2020
© 2020 Ruwanthie de Chickera
ISBN - 978-624-5487-11-0

Script Content and Layout – Dinushika Seneviratne and Piumi Wijesundara
Cover Design – Prasad Aluthwattha
Cover Photograph – Prauda Buwaneka

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A Stages Theatre Group presentation
Commissioned by the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion
First performed in
London, February, 2017

Introduction to *The Certificate*

The Certificate is a monologue, written from the perspective of a stateless child for performance by a pre-teen or young teenager. Its development was informed by interviews conducted with stateless children across the world.

The Certificate speaks of a young stateless girl's challenges as a dynamic, talented, ambitious young person with the potential of a bright future ahead of her, except for the single challenge that she has no legal recognition or rights as a human being. The monologue addresses several of the complex issues of statelessness, including domestic violence, systemic discrimination against women and the rights of children who inherit statelessness.

The Certificate was initially commissioned by the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion (ISI) for performance at "The World's Stateless" book launch event in February 2017. *The Certificate* was next commissioned by the UNHCR, Sri Lanka for performance in Colombo in 2017.

The Certificate was subsequently included in the CANCELLED Arts Programme curated by Empathy & Risk and performed as an interruption at the Opening Plenary of the World Conference on Statelessness in the Hague in June 2018. The play interrupted the proceedings.

The initial performance of *The Certificate* was by ***Kadhija Badri***. Subsequently, teenager ***Shyalina Muthumudalige*** from Sri Lanka was cast in the role.

Reviews of *The Certificate*

“Shyalina's performance was not a performance. It carried the suffering of many souls. When I watched it, it was like a melted iron poured into my soul and flowed through my eyes.

I meet stateless children and families almost every day and I can never get immune to their pain. If only I could, I would pack their voices and unfold them before the world.

When Shyalina raised her hands and put forward her questions with all those files and papers she was carrying, my heart cried out. I strongly feel this medium is very powerful to reach out to the change makers and I wish you could do this during UN general assembly too.”

Deepthi Gurung
Statelessness Activist, Nepal

“For the past fifteen years or so I have been in positions of authority mainly at the United Nations. I try not to get used to it but am treated with a great deal of respect and deference. So at the end of my speech when this young girl got up and challenged the authority of our words with her narrative of what survivors really undergo and how we have failed them, I was taken aback. Till she started walking onto the stage I did not know it was a performance. But even for a moment she made us pause, think and reflect. Her passion kept us enthralled. It was a voice that is rarely heard in conference halls. That is the purpose of art- to challenge us to take another look at the world and to see it see it in different ways.”

Radhika Coomaraswamy
Former Under Secretary General and
United Nations Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict.

For more detailed insights on this play, including the back story about how it was made, an analysis of all its design elements, its production video, soundtrack, publicity campaign, all press reviews and audience comments, and more, please visit its production page on the Stages Theatre Group website www.stages.lk

The Certificate

Character A young, smart and confident young girl of about 13 years.
She is carrying two large files full of documents.

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I have a question that no one can answer. So, I have stopped asking it.

Now... I don't have a problem understanding things. I understand lots of things. I understand ... things better than most kids my age. My mom says I understand most things better than her.

But she says that probably because ... she can't read, you know... And, of course, because she's my mom... and all...

But hey... It's important to try and understand things for yourself right? Well, that is what I think.

Like... I think kids and adults live in different worlds. And it's not that one world has toys and balloons and colours and is full of shorter, lisping people and stuff ... no, it's that we live in a world of different rules. One set of rules for kids and the adults have different rules for the very same thing. It's like kids are taught about a world that adults don't really, really believe in, you know...

Like... we learn in school that policemen are good and the governments look after people, and that it's bad to lie and that everyone has equal rights and that every child is special and *la di da*...

Well, nothing about my life has been like this.

It was confusing for a very long time. Then I just decided that adults lie. They lie all the time. Once you figure that out – all of it makes sense.

My mom always takes me with her when she has to go to meet people to '*sort out our lives.*' This generally means a lot of time spent in queues. And a lot, a lot a lot of time filling out forms and writing letters and then telling our story.... Over and over and over again...

My mother never seems to get tired of telling our story. I am frankly just sick of it. But my mom, she knows how to tell our story – she knows the voice, the expression, all of it. It's like turning on a switch.

'So... tell us your story...'

'Click'.

It's like that.

Oh man... she's repeated that same old story so many times to so many people that we know we will never ever meet again ...

I watch her. Her mouth speaks the words but I can see her heart leaving her body. It just leaves. And she becomes very, very small and very, very ... empty. She's been getting the same answers to the questions she has been asking for all of my life. That is more than 14 years. But she still asks these questions. She asks all of them. Every single one. Just in case one of them will be answered differently.

My mom's a clever lady. She can't read letters but she can read people's faces. She knows what someone is going to say before they say it. (Maybe even before they know it). This is probably why she talks without stopping. Because she tries to get in as many words as possible before the person says what she knows they were going to say from the beginning.

Me? I have just stopped asking the questions which I know no one will answer.

Whenever we go out to 'sort out our lives', we take our 'documents file' with us. And before and after every meeting mama gets me to count the papers in the documents file and put them all in order. There are 63 documents. Without the photocopies.

The documents file is the most important thing in our house. Most important. My mom always says, if there is a bomb or a storm or anything, first pick up the documents file.

My mom is dead proud of me. I keep winning all kinds of certificates in school. I have a whole pile of them. I have certificates for almost every subject I have studied. Because studying comes easy to me. I remember one of my certificates was for a speech I gave on my country. I spoke of this country like I belonged here... My teacher said it was brilliant. But she sounded sadder than proud and she couldn't look me in the eye.

When I was smaller, I used to make my own certificates. 'This is to certify that (XX) completed (YY) on this day.' And I would sign it. My mother got certificates for all sorts of things she did for us. My father got certificates for smiling and making jokes. This was to encourage him to do these things.

My father is a horrible man. I wish she would leave him. But she says that our problems will be bigger if she were on her own. I don't quite see how. Sharing a house with him is so difficult. But my mother says that until the laws of countries treat women the same way they treat men, women will always have to keep a man with them.

These are the kind of 'grown up' things that I know about.

I worry about my younger sister. I love her very much and I would not change her for anything, except that this world is so cruel to girls.

My sister is very funny. She has a very funny understanding of the world. She believes that countries are different colours. Because in the world map in her class room, all the countries are different colours. I tried to explain to her that this was not really how the world was divided. But she imagines that from out of space, if you look at the world, you really see all these different countries in different colours. She loves to tell people that our father came from a green country and our mother is from a purple country, where we live. Where we were born. She tells everyone that this is her country. My sister is still young.

My mom and I fought the other day. About my certificate file. I tried to switch the documents file with my certificates file. The documents file has 63 documents – and it's a really good file. But my certificate file now has over 81 certificates. And I am scared I might lose some.

“Idiot child, what are you doing?”

“I need a bigger file mama... I got three more certificates from school this term...”

“The documents file!”

“It's a bigger file, I need a bigger file for my certificates...”

“Your certificates don't matter.”

“You're saying that because you are stupid.”

“*You* are stupid. All those certificates don't mean a thing ...”

Then she hit me. And then she cried.

Later she said she was sorry she hit me. And that she was sorry she said that my certificates didn't mean anything. She said she had been wrong. That they meant that I was easily the best in my class, in my school, in the whole district, in the country ... she said I could one day become the best in the whole world...

And as she said these words to me I saw her heart leave her body... like I have watched it leave her body so many times when she tells our story to strangers with cold eyes. And I realised then that my mother's heart leaves when it cannot bear to hope.

I immediately had a question. And also immediately, I knew it was a question I should never ask.

So I found out for myself, that night... when she was busy... when she was... when my dad and she were arguing ... I found out what I already knew. It was easy. I knew the documents

file better than anyone in the family. I knew my certificates file better than anyone. But I went through them both carefully. Just to be sure.

And I was right. And my mother was right. I had certificates that told me I could write and make things and play the cello and run fast and remember better, count better, reason better, the best in my class, school and beyond... But I didn't have a certificate that told me that I was born. I didn't have a certificate to say I was from this country. And without those, none of the rest mattered.

Sometimes I get tired of the lies. I love the fact that I am in a good school. But I sometimes want to tell the teacher that what she is teaching the class about this country, and about the world, is not true.

Without the certificates that I don't have, that my mother doesn't have, it does not matter if you are a human being. You can be treated like you are not really a human being. I have seen this happening to people in the queues. I have seen it happening to my mother. She has not let it happen to me yet.

This is one of those places where children's rules and adult rules begin to part.

Because we are taught by adults to say the truth and to be kind and responsible. But the truth is that I am a human being and kindness is to assure my mother that I will be always treated like I am a human being and responsibility is to give me a certificate saying that I am a human being so that my mother and I can stop standing in queues and filling out forms and repeating our story and being shouted at by strangers and being beaten by my dad... and just stop worrying and just start living because really, really, really, all these problems will stop. They will stop for us, forever. We don't need help with any of our other problems. Any other problem I can figure out how to solve.

I am not afraid.

I just need someone to confirm that I was born.

What in the world makes this so difficult to admit?

I'm sorry. I asked one of the questions I promised myself never to ask. Silly me. Sorry...

END

Production Credits

The Certificate was first performed in **London** on February 2017 at the book launch of “The World’s Stateless” by The Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion.

The Certificate is best experienced as an unannounced intervention.

Performances of *The Certificate* were executed by the following cast and crew:

CAST

Shyalina Muthumudalige (Colombo 2018, The Hague 2019)

Khadija Badri (London, 2017)

DESIGN TEAM

Director Ruwanthie de Chickera

Writer Ruwanthie de Chickera

Designer Jayampathi Guruge

PRODUCTION TEAM

Stage Manager Akalanka Prabhashwara (Colombo 2018)

Actor Trainer Ashling O’Shea (The Hague, 2019)

Production Manager Dharini Priscilla

Pemanthi Fernando

Photographer Prauda Buwaneka (Colombo 2018)

Videographer David Cotterrell (London 2017)

Prauda Buwaneka (Colombo 2018)

For more detailed insights on this play, including the back story about how it was made, an analysis of all its design elements, its production video, soundtrack, publicity campaign, all press reviews and audience comments, and more, please visit its production page on the Stages Theatre Group website www.stages.lk

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