



Inspiration

John Retallack

IT WAS THE YEAR 2000. I was fifty years of age and I had been a theatre director since my twenties. I had directed a small-scale company (ATC London), run a rep (Oldham Coliseum) and led a national touring company (Oxford Playhouse). I was absolutely fed up with directing. I wanted to do something first-hand, not tell everyone else what to do. I wanted to write. I'd adapted the words of others (Melvyn Burgess' *Junk*, Camus' *The Plague*) but never made up my own story. I had a theme. The story of the Kosovans coming to the UK in '99 had touched me. How they had been welcomed in Glasgow and rejected on the south coast. I wanted a story about how the British react as hosts to those forced to leave their home. I told the Arts Council I wanted to write and direct this play — but I had no idea of the story or the title or what I was going to write. On the eve of the Arts Council meeting, I had got no further. The next day I drove to Tunbridge Wells as slowly as possible, hoping that inspiration would strike. I parked my car in the Arts Council car park to go and meet the individual who was prepared to commission a play from me — on the condition that I also directed it. I stopped to smoke a cigarette, by now talking aloud to myself in a near-fury that I had a commission waiting for me and no pitch to make, nothing to inspire the officer concerned and make her confident that she had done the right thing in awarding the money to a man who had never written a play. My phone went off and I jumped. It was my daughter, Hanna. I was about to answer and then, for some reason, I paused and let it ring. Hanna's best friend at the time was a girl called Hannah. 'Hannah and Hanna'; that worked. One would be the Kosovan – without the 'h' – and the other would be a Londoner — with



the ‘h’. Londoner? It must relate to the South East — where? Tunbridge Wells? Sevenoaks? There must be somewhere more exciting in the South East — by now I was walking across the car park or I would be late. Kent has so many asylum seekers along its coast — Deal, Whitstable, Ramsgate, Margate. *Margate!* It would be about two girls, one Kosovan, one English, both living in Margate, one who hates the incomers, the other overjoyed to be in England. But they would have nothing in common! I was up the street stairs now and opening the door of reception and a song was playing as I came in — ‘Torn’ by Natalie Imbruglia... The receptionist said that the Arts Council officer was on her way down to see me. She stepped out of the lift. I couldn’t hold back — I felt *inspired*. I said to her:

‘The play is set in Margate. It’s about two girls of sixteen, one an asylum seeker — Hanna; the other the leader of a local gang — Hannah, with an “h”; and the one thing that they have in common is that they love to sing karaoke...’

When I got home, I gave Hanna a big hug and thanked her. ‘What for?’ she said.

The play *Hannah and Hanna* played, in total, over 500 times in Britain and abroad, winning a number of awards between 2001 and 2006.