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In Calais

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At the Jules Ferry refugee centre in Calais on Saturday there were hundreds of men clamouring to get in to listen to Handel's *Messiah* but the gates were closed, with 700 people already inside. I was there with [Play 4 Calais](#), an offshoot of the [Lexi social enterprise cinema](#) in North London, spearheaded by the actress Alix Wilton Regan. The aim was to bring four days of film screenings to some of the Jungle refugee camp's estimated 6500 inhabitants, including children who are waiting to be reunited with their parents in the UK.

Before we left, there was news of rampant scabies, of female volunteers being harassed, of fascists blocking the entrance to the site and of police dispensing tear gas. I was frightened. I needn't have been.

As soon as we arrived in Calais we went to the warehouse to deliver the donations we'd brought with us, everything from mince pies to winter jackets. There were 110 volunteers and mountains of supplies, and it seemed as well organised as any high street store.

We drove on to the Jungle with our generator, screen, beanbags (the front rows of the stalls), and fairy lights to put around the cinema door. The site was surrounded by gendarmes. At the entrance, a refugee from Afghanistan was selling Red Bull, toothpaste and tinned meat. A man was washing his hair with a watering can of cold water. 'No tear gas, please,' a notice said. Another: 'Being black is not a crime.'

We wandered among the tents and wood-and-tarpaulin shelters. There was mud everywhere, discarded clothes (there's nowhere to wash them), mounds of rubbish, Portaloos full of excrement. There was also an Eritrean church, a vaccination centre, a visual arts space, a free café serving polenta and ginger tea (with a decorated Christmas tree in the corner), and a business offering 'hammam and hot showers' (the only hot water in the camp), started by a refugee.

We spread news of the film screenings as we went. Two people asked us if we had any food. We were invited into a makeshift meeting place where four Sudanese men were sitting around a barrel filled with burning logs. 'Sit down, welcome, will you have tea or coffee?' Mohammed asked. He had come from Darfur, and been in a displaced persons' centre since 2003.

Three of the 'wild boys' (as the children without adult relatives are known in the camp) arrived. We were warned to watch our belongings. 'He saw his parents being murdered,' a volunteer said, pointing out one of the boys. 'Is there anything you need?' I asked him. 'A bike,' he replied. A man wearing a high vis jacket walked by, taking a group of French visitors on a guided tour. A brass band oompahed past.

Our first screening was in the [Good Chance Theatre](#), the geodesic dome that was set up a few months ago as the Jungle's performing arts centre. We asked the refugees queuing outside what they'd like to see. They chose a Kung Fu movie, once they'd ascertained that we didn't have the new *Star Wars*. There was room for 130 people in the dome; almost all of them were men (most people in the camp are young men), along with a pregnant woman and her sister. Not long into the film, a dozen people rushed out: someone wanting a seat had said there was a truck leaving for England. At the end the audience filed out smiling, thanking us and shaking our hands.

We left the camp at 9 p.m. and drove back to our hotel with our equipment, which we kept locked up in the cars. 'But I've seen more crime in Glasgow than in The Jungle,' a warehouse volunteer told us. He'd come for ten days and stayed for three months.

On the way back, we saw two men scaling the wire fence surrounding the port. It looked dangerous, but no more so I suppose than any of the other unimaginable barriers they'd crossed on their journeys north.