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Report: Something biblical for the weekend?

As Margate prep ares for a plague of frogs and film crews, AA Gill asks: can they be serious?

The moment you walk out of the train station, Margate hits you with the Proustian nostalgia of the English seaside. There's the whiff of ozone, rotting seaweed and chip fat, the ambient static of the waves, predatory herring gulls and the mechanical chatter and pop from dozing amusement arcades. And there's the bright, bounced, magical light, the North Sea horizon gleaming like polished steel. The light is astonishing — it was this light that turned on Turner.

On a bright August day, the beach is deserted. The promenade shops are boarded or closed. The lido has silted up, the funfair is bankrupt and, along the front, occasional wiry men walk frightening dogs and stare at the horizon. On the old sea wall, a young black girl stares down at you from a large banner. She looks passive and guarded. Beside her, another banner shows a Bible open at Exodus; on a third, there's the back of a head with plaited hair. The images are a surprise, mostly because so plainly, on so many levels, they don't belong here.

The girl is from the Congo; the pictures were taken by the American photographer Wendy Ewald. They are from a series called Towards a Promised Land and are part of a larger project called Exodus. A series of these children stare down from the walls of the town like advertisements for immigrants. It's a hard sell. They are advertising the presence in Margate of the world's unwanted, the invisible people. They are pictures of refugees who have been washed up here like flotsam. Margate is a collection point for the displaced, the persecuted and the lost. It's the end of long and desperate journeys, and the beginning of new lives.

These pictures have echoes of school portraits, the New Deal photographs of the American Depression and Benetton posters. They are touching and accusatory. Each child has written a sentence: "I don't believe it, me in Europe, no, it's not me." "My dad said he was wanting to leave because it was trouble over there, fighting, windy, bricking, all sorts," says the shaven back of a head belonging to a lad who escaped from Belfast. Ewald, the photographer, is my cousin. Thirty years ago, I went to stay with her in a cabin in the hillbilly mountains of Kentucky, where she had set up a darkroom in a one-room school and begged some cameras, with the idea that she would teach children to

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photograph their lives and dreams, while she, in turn, would photograph them. It was the beginning of a lifetime project that has taken her round the world. She has grown famous and venerable. I spoke to her when I got back from Margate. "What are you doing now?" "Lecturing," she said. "What on?" "Myself," she laughed, with uneasy self-deprecation.

The big banners in Margate are a departure for her as much as they are about departure for their subjects. What does a boy from Belarus or Iraq make of a collapsed seaside town where there are no childhood associations or kiss-me-quick memories? Just this windblown place with its resentful unemployed and fearful pensioners. The reception for the pictures has been grudging and sullen. The taxi drivers moan about the immigrants, and about the art interest in the immigrants — but moaning is a prerequisite for being a taxi driver. To begin with, there was even resistance and resentment from the immigration department of the council. There is a predictable local, non-specific racism about these refugees, called, collectively and dismissively, "Kosovans". The banner of an obviously Muslim girl has been firebombed twice; the Congolese girl was covered in chalk. But to a visitor, these images are striking and thoughtful, with an impeccable, decent cultural and social motivation, exactly the sort of civilised aesthetic outreach that concerned people yearn for.

The larger Exodus project includes an Antony Gormley giant man, to be built out of waste — a sort of rubbish Angel of the South — that will be set on fire (on purpose). There will be a concert of Plague Songs, written by Rufus Wainwright, Scott Walker and Laurie Anderson, at an Exodus weekend next month, where a Channel 4 film, written and directed by Penny Woolcock, will be made, using locals and refugees as performers. The whole Cirque du Soleil experience has been collated and financed by Artangel, the arts charity that gave us Rachel Whiteread's House and the re-enactment of the Orgreave miners' riot.

Michael Morris, an Artangel director, who was showing me round Margate, says it's all going to be very exciting. They have rewritten the Bible story — "But we've taken out God, though we've kept the plagues." Are there going to be boils and thin cows? "Well, we haven't got all the plagues, but there should be frogs and lice."

It's going to be filmed in the defunct funfair and the silted-up lido. Morris is an enthusiastic and committed man of the arts, with a heavy rucksack and a 12 o'clock meeting with the council ways-and-means committee. He's a nice, diligent, thoughtful bloke, and this project has taken an immense amount of his time. He believes in moving art out of its building box and putting it into communities, ones that don't get much access to culture or anything that looks nice or relevant to them. This is a good thing, a fine ambition, and who is to gainsay him, even if, here on the seafront, he does look like a windblown Dr Livingstone offering missionary art to the natives?

For all Morris's confident talk of involving the local community, you don't get the feeling that if they had been asked what should be done with x million in arty money, the locals would have said: "Spend it on a re-enactment of Exodus." An incendiary Gormley and banners of black kids wouldn't have been top of their list.

There's an underlying sense that the locals are getting this because it's good for them, and there's a bristle of resentment. You can see their point. How would Islington like it if it was given the international wet

T-shirt festival, where everyone was invited to come and get soaked and jiggy because it was being filmed by the Men and Motors channel?

The influx of refugees is what interests charitable intellectuals. They were uninterested when this was just a run-down seaside town full of Kentish pensioners and chemical-factory workers. (Viagra is the biggest local product.) The Exodus project, for all its impeccable motivation and sensitivity, smells like Victorian cultural imperialism, and Margate has suffered from that before. The Turner Centre was going to be a Tate satellite gallery, bravely built in the sea; after a £7m feasibility study, they binned the idea as stupid. Then there's Tracey Emin, daughter of an immigrant father and Margate's most famous artistic child, after Turner and George Moreland. They're not best pleased with Tracey down here — they don't think she's a great advertisement. By coincidence, I bumped into her the night before I made my visit. "What shall I do by way of culture in your home town?" "Go to the cockles and whelks stand on the promenade, take your cockles and whelks to the pub over the way and have a pint while looking at the sea." "Is that fun, then?" "Well, it is if you're an Australian and you've never done it before."

TS Eliot is said to have written *The Waste Land* down here while recovering from one of his funny turns. Morris thinks he might even have composed some of it on the big dipper. I searched around for what the locals might do for civilised self-improvement. Margate has slot machines and donkeys, a lot of posters for the parallel universe of tribute bands. And there's a pretty Victorian proscenium theatre where I found them rehearsing *Blithe Spirit*. But I reckon the most popular public activity is walking bow-legged dogs with mouths bigger than my head.

Maybe the Exodus experience will be a huge success; perhaps all the locals will join in, have fun and realise that the refugees are vulnerable and valuable neighbours who deserve love and protection. Maybe there will be an Exodus festival every year, with donkey rides to the promised land and candyfloss manna from heaven. Conceivably, Channel 4 will get an evocative film and this will be the beginning of a renaissance for Margate. Maybe, perhaps, conceivably.

As I stood looking out at the passing tankers, an old lady with a walking stick said: "Oh, are you signalling to more illegal immigrants?" I told her I was expecting thousands. She cackled. "You could give them a change of clothes and they'd be off, and we'd never know they'd been here."

Exodus Day, Margate, September 30; details at www.themargateexodus.org.uk

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