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Stage

Sneak Peek: Shadow Game review – innovative record of a refugee’s journey



Available online

Delivered by smartphone in voice notes, videos and texts, this ‘real-time documentary’ follows Afghan teen Sajid on an arduous trek across Europe

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This innovative production is pioneering storytelling in more ways than one. Downloaded from an app and absorbed on a smartphone, it is received over a seven-day stretch and billed as “the world’s first real-time digital documentary”.

Created by Belgian theatre company SKaGeN as part of the [Edinburgh festival](#) fringe’s Big in Belgium season, we follow Sajid Khan, a teenager from Afghanistan who is trekking across huge swathes of land in Europe, along the Balkan route, often in the most perilous conditions, in a bid to find harbour.

Conceived by Mathijs F Scheepers with scenarios by Korneel Hamers, Elisa Demarré and SkaGeN, the material we receive as voice notes, videos and texts was collated by Els van Driel and Eefje Blankevoort, who followed 10 parentless boys fleeing the Taliban for a documentary. Sajid Khan - or SK - is the sole focus here.

We are told he spent a total of two years on the road and is playing “the game” - forced to travel with smugglers in trucks or by trains, taxis or on foot - when we meet him.

■ Correspondence arrives on our phones at random times, and with a keen sense of urgency

After becoming stuck in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Covid pandemic when the documentary crew can no longer visit him in person, they begin communicating through WhatsApp. That correspondence is what arrives on our phones at random times, and with a keen sense of urgency.

Designed by Lidia Nagibina, there are voice notes telling us SK has walked for eight-hour stretches at a time. He travels the breadth of Croatia hoping to seek asylum in Slovenia but messages report appalling violence from police, who he says also take his money, and then deport him. “They beat us with sticks,” he says, and what hits home is the terrible sense of hostility towards refugees across Europe.

But there is also camaraderie in the community with whom SK travels: a Facebook post warns “don’t come” along a part of the track. One wordless video that SK sends after a long day of walking lasts only a few seconds and we see boys and men resting in woodland looking so bone tired that it is deeply moving.

Gradually SK is fleshed out as a character, though we want much more background than we receive within the brief immediacy of this medium. There are snatches of the bigger story - that SK has a brother in Italy whom he is trying to reach, that Eefje has a child whom he inquires after. It is clear they have an affectionate relationship but much of this background is mentioned only in passing.

The messages inevitably become mixed in with personal phone alerts and this renders them more intimate but adulterated, too, by the minutiae of daily life. There is a virtual foyer where viewers can converse, and have the option to follow part two of SK’s journey. But this seven-day cycle leaves him mid-flight and with a painful, sisyphian sense of pushback, pain and invisibility.

- [Available until 27 August](#)
- [All our Edinburgh festival reviews](#)